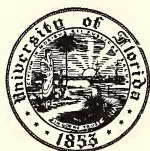




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THOMAS WOLFE

The Weather of His Youth

THOMAS WOLFE
The Weather of His Youth


by
LOUIS D. RUBIN, JR.

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Baton Rouge



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for my friend
Joseph E. Nettles



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Preface

The present book was begun in the summer of 1951. It grew out of a long-time interest in Thomas Wolfe's novels, one which was adjusted over the course of ten years or so until I realized that what I thought the novels were "about" was considerably different from what had been true in my earlier readings. The chapters that follow are an attempt to analyze some of the implications of this, and I should add that in working the matter out over the course of several years, many of my notions about Thomas Wolfe changed even more radically as the writing progressed. Much of the line of investigation embodied in earlier drafts was eventually relegated into subordinate emphasis, while the meaning of the time structure of the Wolfe novels took on an added importance. It seemed increasingly interesting, too, to understand the relationship between the autobiographical novelist, his material, and his audience. Here, however, there was the risk of moving in a direction away from the Wolfe novels themselves, and toward a problem involving the nature of autobiographical fiction, in which Thomas Wolfe's writings would tend to serve mostly as material for much more generalized concerns. Since this was not the ultimate intention, the discussion of "autobiographical form" has with some misgivings been confined largely to the first chapter.

The recitation of acknowledgements is long. My friend, collaborator and former colleague at the Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Robert D. Jacobs of the University of Kentucky, was of primary help. This is hardly less true of Mr. John Edward Hardy, now of Notre Dame University and for two years a colleague at Johns Hopkins. The role of Mr. Elliott Coleman, chairman of the Writing Seminars of the Johns Hopkins Uni-

versity, was such that I could not possibly have written this book without him.

To other former colleagues and teachers on the faculty of the Johns Hopkins University I am indebted. Dr. Georges Poulet provided many of the insights into the time structure of the Wolfe novels. Dr. George Boas read the manuscript and advanced numerous suggestions, most of which have been incorporated into the text. Dr. C. Vann Woodward also examined the manuscript at an early stage, and thereafter patiently contributed advice when approached with my frequent appeals for help. Dr. Leo Spitzer provided encouragement from beginning to end. At one point in the preparation of this book, Dr. Carl Brent Swisher stepped outside of his domain of American constitutional law to ask several penetrating literary questions which caused a significant change in the writing that followed. Dr. Francis J. Thompson, formerly of Johns Hopkins and now of Rollins College, provided considerable aid.

To several others who read the manuscript critically, I am indebted. They include Dr. Randall Stewart, now of Brown University and soon of Vanderbilt University, whose detailed commentary was closely followed; Mr. Richard Walser of the North Carolina State University, who not only aided in the readying of this book but whose own collection of essays, *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*, was frequently utilized, as will be obvious from the notes to this volume; and Dr. Herbert J. Muller of Purdue University, author of an excellent introduction to Wolfe's novels for the *Makers of Modern Literature* series, who provided some advantageous suggestions for revision of this manuscript.

Many others played a part in the writing of this book. Mr. and Mrs. Guy R. Friddell, Jr., of Richmond, Va., were continually of help and encouragement. Mr. Edward Aswell of New York City provided valuable information about his friend Thomas Wolfe; and Mr. Don Shoemaker contributed several points of information; others, among them Mr. J. J. Kilpatrick, editor of the *Richmond News Leader*, Dr. Donald Davidson of Vanderbilt University, Mr. Robert Hazel of New York, Mr. A. D. Emmart of the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, and Miss Emily

Greenslet of Baltimore, Md., were ready with encouragement and help.

In June of 1953 the author was awarded a fellowship in criticism by *The Sewanee Review*, to work on what will eventually be a study of modern Southern poetry. I confess, however, to having utilized much of the term of the fellowship to revise this study of a modern Southern novelist, and I want to acknowledge with gratitude the interest and help of Dr. Monroe K. Spears, editor of *The Sewanee Review*, during that time and afterward.

As this manuscript was delivered to the printer for typesetting, there was received a copy of a new study, *Zeit Und Wirklichkeit Bei Thomas Wolfe*, by Dr. Karin Pfister, of Heidelberg, Germany. Professor Hellmut Bock, of the faculty of the University of Keil, who was in temporary residence on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, was kind enough to translate key passages which showed me that here at last was a definitive study of some of the important philosophical dimensions of the Wolfe novels.

For permission to reprint quotations from *Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother, Look Homeward, Angel, Of Time and the River, From Death to Morning*, and *The Story of a Novel*, the author is grateful to Charles Scribner's Sons; and to Harper and Brothers for permission to reprint passages from *The Web and the Rock, You Can't Go Home Again, Mannerhouse*, and *The Hills Beyond*. For the use of photographs reproduced in this volume he is indebted to Charles Scribner's Sons, and to Miss Myra Champion, custodian of the Thomas Wolfe Collection of the Pack Memorial Public Library, Asheville, North Carolina.

Finally, the author is grateful for encouragement and understanding given him over many years by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Louis D. Rubin, Sr., of Richmond, Virginia, and by his wife, Eva Redfield Rubin.

LOUIS D. RUBIN, JR.

University of Pennsylvania
January 15, 1955

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THOMAS WOLFE

The Weather of His Youth

The Form of Autobiographical Fiction

IN September of 1955, Thomas Wolfe will have been dead seventeen years. During the ten years before he died he had published two novels, a collection of short stories, and a memoir about the writing of his first two novels. Within three years after his death his publishers had released two more posthumous novels, and a collection of shorter pieces which contained ten chapters of another uncompleted novel.

The body of Thomas Wolfe's work, for all intents and purposes, was complete by 1941. Later, in 1948, an early play, *Mannerhouse*, was brought out, and in 1951 his first sketchy notes on the trip he made through the Far Western national parks just before he died were published in book form. But these last two works were minor, and any interest they occasioned was due entirely to their authorship.

Seventeen years is not so long a time, but it is quite long enough to permit an author to lose his reputation and his appeal. If Wolfe's main attraction had been that of novelty or topical relevance, if the success of his books had depended upon their newness, then we might have expected a considerable falling off in readership of the Wolfe novels during a decade and a half of wars and other diversions.

What has happened, however, has been quite the opposite. Not only are all of Thomas Wolfe's books still in print, but most are available in variously priced editions. One may now purchase *Look Homeward, Angel*, for example, in the original

format, in a less expensive illustrated edition, in a Modern Library "Giant" reprint, in a lower priced reprint, and Part II of it, retitled *The Adventures of Young Gant*, in a paperback edition. Selections from Wolfe's work have been edited, not very happily, into a "Portable" edition. Some of the poetic passages in the novels are collected in a volume entitled *The Face of a Nation*. A number of the more obviously rhythmical passages have been arranged in verse form under the title of *A Stone, A Leaf, A Door*. The letters written by Wolfe to his mother have been published. His correspondence with his academic superior in the Department of English at the Washington Square College of New York University, where he taught during the 1920's, has recently appeared in book form. A two-volume edition of other letters by Wolfe is scheduled for publication soon. Six book-length studies of his life and work, one of them in French, as well as a volume of critical and biographical essays about him, have been published. His novels have all appeared in British as well as American editions, and have been translated into German, French, Italian, and Scandinavian. Even his mother has been the subject of one book.

Popularity is not necessarily an indication of a writer's literary importance, of course. But Wolfe's appeal is not that of the cheap "pot-boiler." The elements usually associated with the typical best-seller are missing from his work. There are few lurid sex scenes, no cheap religiosity. Exciting situational adventures and tricky plotting are missing entirely. Using none of the aids of high-powered book-club promotion or flashy, suggestive jacket designs, dealing with subjects which are seldom either lascivious or sensational, making their appeal not with inherently pleasing plot situations but through characterization alone, the Wolfe novels have continued to enjoy a widespread readership.

Among most, though not all, contemporary formalist critics, Wolfe's reputation is not now high.¹ Few of the writers who contribute essays to the better quarterly reviews have had much good to say of Thomas Wolfe. When he is mentioned, it is usually in passing, as witness Caroline Gordon's recent remark that Wolfe "lived and died an amateur writer."² In a recent

editorial in the *Western Review*, Mr. R. V. Cassill summed up such critical objections to Wolfe:

What about form? (We are intensely concerned about form and Wolfe's editors had to put his novels together for him.) What about language? (Wolfe imitated every one, usually quite badly. We are intensely concerned about the language of prose fiction.) Can anyone today even read the boring masses of Wolfe's novels? (People we all know *have* managed to read Lawrence's later novels, and James's, and Melville's *Pierre*.)

Mr. Cassill goes on to predict a forthcoming revival of critical interest in Wolfe, however: "It does not matter that Wolfe's hands are the hands of Esau. His voice is something like Balder's, as Forster says of Lawrence. It is 'for what they have to say' that writers are revived. Styles and forms out of the past are never much good again for the contemporary writer or for the writer as reader."³ If Mr. Cassill's prediction turns out to be correct, it will not be so much a "revival" of Wolfe among critical circles as a discovery. Wolfe has never enjoyed any great repute among most of the better formalist critics. For the young men of culture rare whom he often satirizes, and who declare of a writer that "I'm sorry—I can't read him. I've tried it—I really have, you know—but it simply can't be done," there is too much about Wolfe that seems to preclude his being taken seriously. For critics like Caroline Gordon who would censure novelists for not having "mastered any of the great lessons in technique that are to be learned from Henry James,"⁴ there are too many sins of commission.

Whether or not Wolfe manages at any time in the near future to arouse an interest among the better formalist critics, as Mr. Cassill predicts, it is undeniable that among that patient body of readership collectively known as the Common Reader, that almost mythical gentleman to whom all publishers address their best wares and whose taste is only the more persistent for being more quiet, Thomas Wolfe's work has always exercised a strong appeal. And as Doctor Johnson wrote, "by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learn-

ing, must be finally decided all claims to poetical honors." This reader of common sense, uncorrupted by the academies, has never wavered in his taste for Wolfe. The evidence is plain that for a large segment of the reading public, Wolfe's books possess artistic appeal. Even today, for example, when William Faulkner is our most talked-about, written-about novelist, and justifiably so, I am informed by the head of the literature division of one large metropolitan library that the Wolfe novels circulate in three times the quantity of the Faulkner novels.⁵

Now if we were dealing with a writer of "best sellers," of the *Forever Amber* or *Anthony Adverse* variety, these things would not be of any great concern for us. But as has been said before, Wolfe is not a sensationalist. He did not write penny dreadfuls. There is an incident in *Look Homeward, Angel* in which W. O. Gant sells the stone angel, which has for years adorned his monument shop, to mark the grave of a prostitute. As John Peale Bishop remarked, "it cannot be said that Thomas Wolfe ever sold his angel."⁶ Wolfe never wrote down. He never tried to make some easy money with a flimsy, sensational job. We have probably had no writer in the America of this century who was more dedicated than Thomas Wolfe was to doing the best work that he could. William Faulkner, for example, has said of Wolfe that "among his and my contemporaries, I rated Wolfe first because we had all failed but Wolfe had made the best failure because he had tried hardest to say the most. . . . Man has but one short life to write in, and there is so much to be said, and of course he wants to say it all before he dies. My admiration for Wolfe is that he tried his best to get it all said; he was willing to throw away style, coherence, all the rules of preciseness, to try to put all the experience of the human heart on the head of a pin, as it were."⁷

Between intent and accomplishment, however, often lies a considerable difference. "To try to put all the experience of the human heart on the head of a pin" is a large order, and yet, as Faulkner says, Wolfe was in dead seriousness about it. As Wolfe wrote in *The Story of a Novel*, "Out of the billion forms of America, out of the savage violence and the dense

complexity of all its swarming life; from the unique and single substance of this land and life of ours, must we draw the power and energy of our own life, the articulation of our speech, the substance of our art." ⁸ And in the first printing of *Of Time and the River* Wolfe listed a whole sequence of novels he intended to write, which were to begin with the earliest settlements in North America and carry through well into the twentieth century. He never quite abandoned this project of telling the story of America. Even at the end of his life he spoke of a new book about the West which would be "really a kind of tremendous kaleidoscope that I hope may succeed in recording a whole hemisphere of life and of America." ⁹

In order for a novelist to draw the "substance of his art" from the "billion forms of America," there will be required, naturally enough, some attention to form. How does he intend to go about doing it? What should be the form of a narrative in which its author wants to embody the spirit of America? A work of art requires as such a formal commitment between its author and its reader. "For here it seems to me in hard and honest ways like these we may find the tongue, the language, and the conscience that as men and artists we have got to have," Wolfe wrote. "Here, too, perhaps, must we who have got no more than what we have, who know no more than what we know, who are no more than what we are, find our America." ¹⁰ But what shall be the form of these hard and honest ways?

The word "form" is an abused word, and one which is often used to castigate Wolfe's work: "He has no sense of form." When people say this about Wolfe, they usually mean that in his novels there is evident no carefully worked out design in which everything happens for a single end, and nothing happens except for that end, and the end is carefully limited, bounded, concise. Similarly, those who want to praise Wolfe without submitting their own critical principles to any kind of analytical discipline say proudly that Wolfe had "too much to say" to submit himself to any rigid form, as if to maintain that discipline of any sort would have tragically emasculated Wolfe's genius. Such critics are prone to speak of Wolfe's

"barbaric yawp" or even his "Elizabethan gusto," and they usually follow up the remark by saying nasty things about Scott Fitzgerald, Flaubert, and Henry James.

In both instances, "form" is being used in the special meaning of "pattern." A pattern in this sense is a thematic device. The artist is bending all his efforts toward the creation of a pattern in his work, in which the artistic effect will depend upon how intricate the pattern is on the one hand, and how balanced on the other. The balance and the intricacy provide the meaning of the work of art.¹¹ There are many good "pattern" novels; Henry James, for example, was intensely interested in patterns, and in most of his novels his intent was primarily to show how various themes and attitudes would work out in a particular situation among a given group of persons. The social pattern as such is James's chief concern.

In this kind of novel the pattern can have "form"—certainly much of James's work has "form" in almost any sense of the word. But so can a novel have "form" which is not by intent a "pattern"—is not created for the sake of the effects of balance and intricacy—if by "form" is meant only the principle which, working with and through the component parts of the novel, gives direction and meaning to the novel as a whole. If we subject the Wolfe novels to this conception of "form," rather than to one which requires the conscious working out of a pattern, our conclusions about whether or not Thomas Wolfe "has no sense of form" are likely to be considerably different.

Using this definition, then—"form" as direction and meaning—what is the "form" of the four Wolfe novels? In what respects do they afford a meaning? Of what does that meaning consist? And how do the component parts work toward that meaning and create it?

Wolfe's announced intention was to put in his art the "unique and single substance of this land and life," to "find our America." As John Peale Bishop has said, "his aim was to set down America as far as it can belong to the experience of one man."¹² He wanted to get the "essence" of his country into an art form. The question one must then ask is, how much

of the "essence" of America is in these four autobiographical novels?

In addition to the passages about Europe, the four Wolfe novels have for their locales four different places: a North Carolina mountain town variously called Altamont and Libya Hill, another North Carolina college town called Pulpit Hill, the city of Boston, and New York City. There are also some brief travelogues of train trips through various places, such as those collected in *The Face of a Nation: Poetical Passages from the Writings of Thomas Wolfe*. What there is of the "unique and single substance of this land and life of ours," then, must be discovered in Wolfe's descriptions of life in these places.

It will be seen at once that there are certain advantages in the choice of North Carolina, on the one hand, and Boston and New York, on the other, as specimen ground for the understanding of America. The one is rural and small town, the other two metropolitan. Thus two basic kinds of life in the United States are involved. And Thomas Wolfe did make a strenuous effort to understand both the town and the city.

Let us examine the way that Wolfe gets at the "unique and single substance" of the North Carolina town. *Look Homeward, Angel* is the novel that has most to do with the town, and perhaps the best example of Wolfe's method comes in the second half of the twenty-fourth chapter of that novel (pp. 325-48), which describes a walk through the town taken by Eugene Gant and his friend George Graves on an April day in 1915.¹³

From the outset of the walk through the town, Wolfe uses a lyrical, richly colorful prose style to describe the doings of downtown Altamont. He makes frequent use of sensory adjectives and verbs, and he is careful to begin by first creating for his readers something of the mood of a spring day in the Carolina mountains:

A light wind of April fanned over the hill. There was a smell of burning leaves and rubble around the school. In the field on the hill flank behind the house a plowman drove his big horse with loose clanking traces around a lessening square of dry fallow earth.

Gee, woa. His strong feet followed after. The big share bit cleanly down, cleaving a deep spermy furrow of moist young earth along its track.

From the first sentence on, Wolfe has begun his texturing of the scene. The description of the "light wind" of April "fanning" over the hill immediately calls up associations, common to most of us, of the streaming, pleasant quality of a not-too-gusty yet definitely active breeze in spring when it has already become too warm for such a breeze to be chilly. It is difficult to think of a single word Wolfe might have chosen in place of either the adjective "light" or the verb "fanned" which would have enabled him to convey quite the same sensory associations that his first sentence affords. In the lines that follow he utilizes all of the five senses to set his meaning: "moist," "dry"—touch and taste; "loose clanking"—sound; "burning leaves"—smell; and the whole passage is visual. Observing, then, the psychological truism that it is the sensory images which most surely evoke associations of memory, Wolfe has given his reader every opportunity to grasp the sensory connotations of his subject matter as well as the bare idea.

Eugene and George leave the school for the downtown area, bantering with friends as they go. They pass, among other things, a church; "From the top of the hill to the left, the swelling unction of the Methodist organ welled up remotely from the choir, accompanied by a fruity contralto voice, much in demand at funerals. Abide with me. Most musical of mourners, weep again!" Here, as all during the walk through the town, Wolfe frequently closes the individual descriptive paragraphs with a line of poetry, in this case Shelley's. Unlike the use made of such quotations by Eliot in *The Waste Land*, however, the attempt is not so much to point up the inequity between the heroic past and the pedestrian present, as to show the universality of the present. We are made to feel that the Asheville scene is in its own way common to many times and places, and that the humdrum day-by-day pursuits are remarkable in themselves. It is a theme echoed, on a more profound note, in the last chapter of *Look Homeward, Angel* when

Eugene observes wonderingly to his brother Ben's ghost that the stone statues of the public square seem to be moving about: "In Babylon! In Thebes! In all the other places. But not here! There is a place where all things happen! But not here, Ben!" There is whimsical irony intended in Wolfe's use of the quotations, to be sure, but no intimation of how crass the times are: "There was a hot blast of steamy air from the Appalachian Laundry across the street and, as the door from the office of the washroom opened, they had a moment's glimpse of negresses plunging their wet arms into the liquefaction of their clothes." To contrast Altamont laundresses and their work with Robert Herrick's silk-clad mistress is amusing, but not particularly pessimistic.

The humor is sometimes less than subtle, and tending toward the burlesque, but it is seldom vicious or savage. What satire there is is mildly deflating rather than devastating:

Across the street, on the second floor of a small brick three-story building that housed several members of the legal, medical, surgical and dental professions, Dr. H. M. Smathers pumped vigorously with his right foot, took a wad of cotton from his assistant, Miss Lola Bruce, and thrusting it securely into the jaw of his unseen patient, bent his fashionable bald head intently. A tiny breeze blew back the thin curtains, and revealed him, white-jacketed, competent, drill in hand.

"Do you feel that?" he asked tenderly.

"Wrogd gdo gurk!"

"Spit!" With thee conversing, I forget all time.

The walk through the town is not merely a collection of descriptive bits, however. The scenes are assimilated into the consciousness of Eugene, the observer, and the incidents as they occur often set off lightning reactions of associational patterns. Unlike an earlier and almost equally successful chapter in *Look Homeward, Angel* describing Old Gant's return from his last Western journey, the walk through the town is not told in the stream-of-consciousness. Instead the explorations into Eugene's thought patterns are only occasional and momentary, and Wolfe relies strongly upon the more usual external technique

to portray Eugene. Thus, after Eugene and George pass an undertaking establishment, they discuss their chances of being buried alive.

Eugene shuddered. "I think," he suggested painfully, "they're supposed to take out your insides when they embalm you."

"Yes," said George Graves more hopefully, "and that stuff they use would kill you anyway. They pump you full of it."

With shrunken heart, Eugene considered. The ghost of old fear, that had been laid for years, walked forth to haunt him.

In his old fantasies of death he had watched his living burial, had foreseen his waking life-in-death, his slow, frustrated efforts to push away the smothering flood of earth until, as a drowning swimmer claws the air, his mute and stiffened fingers thrust from the ground a call for hands.

In *Of Time and the River*, Wolfe's second novel, this would have been the signal for a flight of rhetoric, and we would leave the downtown area of Altamont far behind for a long trip into Eugene's mind while the author unburdened himself of poeticisms on life-in-death and urn burial. But in this novel we get no more reflection than is needed to convey the consciousness that what Eugene has seen had made an imprint on his mind.

The focus in the succeeding paragraph shifts back to the description of the undertaking parlor corridor, and then out of the corridor emerges James Joyce's *The Superior*, *The Very Reverend John Conmee, S. J.*, the walker through Dublin in *Ulysses*. His name, however, has become O'Haley:

At this moment, having given to misery all he had (a tear), the very Reverend Father James O'Haley, S. J., among the faithless faithful only he, unshaken, unseduced, unterrified, emerged plumply from the chapel, walked up the soft aisle rug with brisk short-legged strides, and came out into the light. His pale blue eyes blinked rapidly for a moment, his plump uncreased face set firmly in a smile of quiet benevolence; he covered himself with a small well-kept hat of black velvet, and set off toward the avenue. Eugene shrunk back gently as the little man walked past him: that small priestly figure in black bore on him the awful accolade of his great Mistress, that smooth face had heard the unutterable, seen the un-

knowable. In this remote outpost of the mighty Church, he was the standard-bearer of the one true faith, the consecrate flesh of God.

In swift procession persons and places pass before the eager eyes of Eugene Gant and George Graves as they continue their walk downtown. They near a millinery store, observe the waxen dummy in the window ("O that those lips had language!"); the Rogers-Malone hearse wheels by ("Come, delicate death, serenely arriving, arriving"); a telegraph messenger boy coasts along on his bicycle ("And post o'er land and ocean without rest. Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour"); an old lecher watches a young woman cross the street ("Even in their ashes live their wonted fires"); Eugene and George meet an old palsied bore, who holds them a moment, then after almost choking to death before their eyes totters on down the street ("Grow old along with me"). William Jennings Bryan, the Commoner, is encountered, and observed first as he banters pleasantries with the Reverend John Smallwood, pastor of the First Baptist Church, and then is interviewed by Richard Gorman, twenty-six, city reporter of *The Citizen*. We then have a burlesque newspaper story, complete with sub-headlines and all the journalistic clichés, again reminiscent of *Ulysses*. After this come more persons and places, each described and categorized, and finally the boys turn into Wood's Pharmacy, where they purchase chocolate milks: "O for a draught of vintage that hath been cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth!"

So the walk through the town ends. Altamont is there, in a multitude of particulars. There is almost no abstract description in the episode; Wolfe devotes the entire sequence to depicting scenes and people that he obviously knew well. William Jennings Bryan, for instance, spent considerable time in Asheville during the 1910's, talked of settling down there, and was a familiar figure on Asheville streets. Indeed, Wolfe's mother purchased some real estate from Bryan shortly after her son left for Harvard, and named the development "Bryan Knoll."¹⁴

If we remember Wolfe's proposed function of setting down in his art the unique and single substance of America, we

realize that not only has he shown us a slice of daily life in a particular town, but the chances are also that unless the reader of the passage has been reared in a large metropolitan area he will immediately recognize in Wolfe's portrait of downtown Altamont numerous similarities to his own town or city. The sharp concrete detail in Wolfe's descriptions serves to make the individual scenes so vivid that they invite association and comparison with similar objects in the reader's experience. To quote once again from Dr. Johnson's remarks on Gray's *Elegy*, one could say of the passage that it too "abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo."

The description of the walk through the town occurs about halfway through *Look Homeward, Angel*. At the conclusion of the novel it is the summer of 1920, and Eugene is preparing to leave Altamont for graduate study at Harvard, just as his creator left Asheville that same summer for the same destination. The three novels that follow concern themselves almost exclusively with Eugene and his successor George Webber in the city.

We shall search them in vain, however, for many passages of the quality of the twenty-fourth chapter of *Look Homeward, Angel*, in which the protagonist sees passing before his eyes the "heart" of the city's daily life and routine. There are obvious reasons for this, of course. For one thing, large cities such as Boston and New York do not have compact areas such as downtown Altamont, where the whole life of a city is centered. For another, Eugene and George Webber simply do not know as much about the metropolis of their manhood as Eugene knows about Altamont. As will be shown in a future chapter, Thomas Wolfe's career in the city is one of alternating attraction to and repulsion from it, but never one of simple stasis in which he can observe it dispassionately for its own sake. Often he sees it through glasses of roseate, idyllic hue:

One hears the hoarse notes of the great ships in the river, and one remembers suddenly the princely girdle of proud, potent ties that bind the city, and suddenly New York blazes like a magnificent jewel in its fit setting of sea, and earth, and stars.

There is no place like it, no place with an atom of its glory, pride, and exultancy. It lays its hand upon a man's bowels; he grows drunk with ecstasy; he grows young and full of glory, he feels that he can never die.¹⁵

Or more often than that he sees it through a gray film of fear and resentment:

The tragic light of evening falls upon the huge and rusty jungle of South Brooklyn. It falls without glare or warmth upon the faces of all the men with dead eyes and flesh of tallow-grey as they lean upon their window sills in the sad, hushed end of day.¹⁶

Poor sallow, dark, swarthy creatures that they were, with rasping tongues, loose mouths and ugly jeering eyes, this infamous band of youth was death-in-life itself. It had been brought still-born from its mother's womb into a world of city streets and corners, into all the waning violence of the tenement, bitterly to try to root its meagre life into the rootless rock, meagrely to struggle in its infamous small phlegm along the pavements, feebly to imitate the feeble objects of its base idolatry—of which the most heroic was a gangster, the most sagacious was a pimp, the most witty was some Broadway clown.¹⁷

Wolfe is always obsessed with the impersonality of the metropolis, and his obsession takes the form of a lifeless description of it on his part. Conversely, he sees Altamont as the sum of its individual component parts, and he is thoroughly familiar with the individual inhabitants and their characteristics. His view of the city is of a whole, with the city being personified as a being—a most impersonal, sterile being. It is not the sum of its inhabitants and its occupations, but a symbol, sometimes glamorous, usually malevolent.

So that when we ask what Wolfe has accomplished toward realizing in his novels about the city "the unique and single substance of this land and life of ours," our answer must be that not too much has been accomplished. We get no real depiction of day-by-day life in the city; instead we get the country boy against the city, which is something quite different. The emphasis is almost entirely on the boy, not the city. The city novels represent the story of the impact of urban life on a per-

sonality ill equipped to appreciate it, one which battles with it all the way, and finally rejects it.

Look Homeward, Angel, then, gives us the town, all right; but in his three subsequent novels Wolfe fails to give us the city. His failure is a magnificent one, perhaps; no one else tried so hard as he did to appreciate the city. But few people came to the task with so many handicaps.

Part of the reason for Wolfe's failure to find a meaning for America in the city life lies in the autobiographical nature of his work. As Bishop has remarked, it was Wolfe's intention to capture America, *but in so far as it could belong to the experience of one man*. The experience of the one man was life as experienced by Thomas Wolfe. What he saw and felt, he wrote about; no more and no less, except toward the very last. His was not the art of a Faulkner, who combines uncanny insight into character with a skillful dramatic invention that enables him to write perceptively and convincingly about various kinds of people in a variety of situations.

Until close to the very end of his career Wolfe could not usually conceive of any kind of experience except as it happened to him; and not merely in its general emotional implications but in the particular settings in which he encountered it. Maxwell E. Perkins, Wolfe's first editor, wrote once that "I remember the horror with which I realized, when working with Thomas Wolfe on his manuscript of 'The Angel,' that all these people were almost completely real, that the book was literally autobiographical."¹⁸ Wolfe was a man of tremendous powers of memory; it was his chief artistic resource. It made possible *Look Homeward, Angel*. But it was also his chief limitation. When his memory failed to provide him with both the raw material and the perspective for the work of art, the result was empty, lifeless prose.

"It must be insisted at once that these novels are literally autobiographical," Herbert J. Muller declares at the outset of his commentary of the four Wolfe novels.¹⁹ Muller makes the point that "for an adequate biographical sketch we need only change the names and add some dates." Any of the numerous memoirs about Wolfe by his friends and acquaintances, as well

as the letters he wrote to his mother, will produce incident after incident described in *Look Homeward, Angel* or the subsequent novels. As Muller says, "naturally he omitted, altered, or fused many details; inevitably he colored or transfigured; but the liberties he took are so obvious or unimportant that it is hardly profitable to study the differences between the story of Eugene Gant and the life of Thomas Wolfe."

Wolfe himself vehemently disclaimed the charge that he wrote autobiographical fiction. In *Look Homeward, Angel* he inserted a note that "all serious work in fiction is autobiographical" and that he "meditated no man's portrait here." Autobiographical his books were, however; perhaps not always in the more unimportant particulars, but always at the crucial points. Thus Thomas Wolfe may have begun *Look Homeward, Angel*, in London, whereas Eugene Gant began his novel in France, but the author's and the protagonist's views on writing about home while living in a foreign country, and their memories of the way they felt at the time, are identical. What is always autobiographical is what the protagonist and the narrator, who are one and the same, think and feel about various situations. Let us examine one such incident, chosen nearly at random, for purposes of a specimen. Almost any other major episode in any of the novels could be similarly handled.

In *Look Homeward, Angel* there is a lengthy description of Eugene's first romance, with a girl named Laura James. Wolfe describes Laura as several years older than Eugene. She was a summer guest at "Dixieland," Eliza Gant's boardinghouse. Eugene and Laura went on picnics in the mountains, made love, and Laura promised him that "I will wait for you forever." Then she went home, ostensibly for several weeks, after which Eugene received a note from her informing him that she was to be married to another man to whom she had been engaged. Eugene experienced all the agonies of the jilted suitor. He was unable to put the thought of her out of his mind. Even as late as the next spring his brother Ben sensed this, and asked, "Can't you forget about her?" "No," Eugene replied, "she's been coming back all spring."

That summer Eugene went to work in the Hampton Roads

area of tidewater Virginia. It was 1918, when jobs were available in the busy war plants and military installations. At first he worked in Langley Field Air Base, on the northern side of the roadstead, then in Norfolk and Portsmouth, where Laura James lived. "Over the chaos of his brain hung the shadow of Laura James. Her shadow hung above the town, above all life. It had brought him here; his heart was swollen with pain and pride; he would not go to find her." Wolfe went on to describe Eugene as expecting every minute to encounter Laura by chance: "she would speak to him; he would not speak to her." Eugene hunted out her home, stalked the neighborhood, keeping a block away from the house, "observing it obliquely, laterally, from front and back, with stealthy eye and a smothering thud of the heart, but never passing before it, never coming directly to it." ²⁰

Finally the summer passed, and Eugene prepared to return home. Then he wrote an "enormous letter" to Laura at Norfolk, boasting that he had been there all summer and not called on her. "Besides, the world is full of women; I got my share and more this summer." After mailing it, he was ashamed of himself: "his face was contorted by shame and remorse: he lay awake, writhing as he recalled the schoolboy folly of it. She had beaten him again." ²¹

Thus the account of Eugene's first romance, as set down in *Look Homeward, Angel*. We have at least two ways of comparing its "authenticity" with what "really" happened. In a letter from Wolfe to his mother, written from Norfolk and dated July 6, 1918, there is the following remark: "Tell Mabel that I have not as yet seen fit to look up Clara Paul altho I have been over to Portsmouth once or twice." ²² In the letter he tells his mother of leaving work at Langley Field after a month there to find a job on the Norfolk side of the roadstead. The letter also relates his plans to get a well-paying position as an experienced carpenter at a Quartermaster Terminal, an episode described in the novel as happening to Eugene Gant. Thus his remarks for his sister Mabel about Clara Paul tally very well both in spirit and in time with the fictional account; the tone of the note—"have not yet seen

fit"—shows how desperately defiant Wolfe was about Clara Paul.

In *The Marble Man's Wife*, by Hayden Norwood,²³ a book about Julia Elizabeth Wolfe, Thomas Wolfe's mother, and consisting mostly of Mrs. Wolfe's own reminiscences, there is an account of the episode as she saw it. She identifies Clara Paul as Laura James. Far from "jilting" Thomas Wolfe, however, Clara Paul "made no secret she had her trousseau," Mrs. Wolfe said. Furthermore, Mrs. Wolfe continued, in all the picnics in the hill with Clara Paul, described so idyllically in the novel, the couple were accompanied by Clara's little brother! Mrs. Wolfe tells of Mabel informing her that "Mama, did you know your baby has fallen in love?" and of Tom blushing furiously. "Clara was to be married in two weeks after she left here," Mrs. Wolfe is quoted as saying. "She went to Norfolk to live, and she died, but I don't know when. Somebody told Tom. He never saw her in Norfolk, though he passed the house a time or two."

"It was just a fascination," Mrs. Wolfe continued. "He knew she was going to be married at that time. . . . Tom built it all up in imagination. . . ."

It would seem, then, that the only real differences between the fictional account and the real life model were that Eugene's girl friend was openly rather than secretly affianced to another, and that, if the love scenes of the novel really did occur, they must of necessity have been somewhat less open and obvious than would have been possible with little brother tagging along. The "fiction" in the autobiography consisted only of the omission of certain events which would tend to make the boy-girl relationship less idyllic and above board. That these variations are of minor importance to the total artistic effect of the episode is obvious. What Wolfe might have "built up in imagination" was evidently the importance of the romance to Eugene. But very likely the building up that Mrs. Wolfe refers to occurred at the time of the romance, not in the telling of it in *Look Homeward, Angel*. From the little note to Mabel in the letter from Norfolk, one doubts that the fictional account exaggerated so very much.

This episode is typical of many similar episodes all through the novels and stories. One can hardly name an important event in the fiction which cannot somewhere along the line be substantiated as having actually happened, either in the letters or other of the memoirs and reminiscences. It is not true that everything that happened to Wolfe found its way into the novels, though much of it did; but it is true that most of the events that took place in the novels actually happened in one form or another to their creator.²⁴

Almost up to the end of Wolfe's career this was so. As we shall see, it is only in the fragment of a novel that Wolfe left behind when he died, entitled *The Hills Beyond*, that one may say that the characters seldom serve their author as direct autobiographical spokesmen. From *Look Homeward, Angel* to *The Hills Beyond* was a ten-year journey, marked by four novels and two collections of short stories, all of them closely autobiographical. And since *The Hills Beyond* is a fragment, with only ten chapters of it completed, it is as an autobiographical writer that Wolfe must be considered.

Thus far we have concentrated our examination of the "form" of Wolfe's work on Wolfe's announced direction and meaning. But because Wolfe is a writer who wrote directly about himself, there is a real danger of misunderstanding the Wolfe novels if we accept the author's word alone as to what the novels are "about." Writing his last three novels at a time when, during and following the depression, there was need of reassurance about the "greatness" and "goodness" and "promise" of America, Wolfe might naturally have felt an urge to exaggerate the importance, both to himself and to his critics and readers, of his search for the "unique and single substance of this land and life of ours" in his art. But just as we no longer read *Joseph Andrews* primarily as a burlesque of *Pamela*, so it would be unwise to accept Wolfe's remarks about "finding our America" as the only meaning for his novels, or even the primary meaning for them, and to evaluate their formal success by that standard alone.

Let us examine, then, the career of Eugene Gant and George Webber as it unfolds in the four autobiographical nov-

els. *Look Homeward, Angel* begins as Eugene Gant, the protagonist, is born into a Carolina mountain community named Altamont. His mother is a native of the region, his father a stonemason from Pennsylvania.²⁵ Eugene begins the task of growing up and absorbing the life of the family and community. His mother purchases a large boardinghouse²⁶ and the family sets up under two separate roofs, with Helen staying to cook for her father. Eugene is closest to his brother Ben, a gruff, tender boy some years his senior.²⁷ After a while Eugene is placed in a private school run by the Leonards.²⁸ Eventually he goes off to college at Pulpit Hill, has a difficult time of it at first, but later becomes a popular "big man on campus."²⁹ He spends one summer's vacation at home, where he has the affair with Laura James. Another summer he goes off to the Hampton Roads area to work. Meanwhile his father is ill with cancer, and one winter his brother Ben contracts pneumonia and dies.³⁰ From that time on, Eugene, who has become a playwright, knows that he cannot come back to Altamont to live,³¹ and as the novel closes he is preparing to leave for the North.³²

Look Homeward, Angel takes our autobiographical protagonist from birth through about his twentieth year, from his entrance into the world in a mountain community to his voluntary artistic exile from that community.

The second novel, *Of Time and the River*, opens as Eugene boards the train that will take him to Harvard to do graduate work. He pauses in Baltimore to see his father in the hospital, then continues his northward trip. Graduate study there is a process of writing plays, combing libraries, and planning great things.³³ He also meets his mother's uncle, Bascom Pentland,³⁴ and he has a weird affair with a young lady. He is called home for his father's death, but returns soon afterward. His closest friend at Harvard is an older boy named Starwick, who is a suave, contained, elegant sort of person.³⁵ Meanwhile Eugene has written a play which is being considered by a New York producer,³⁶ and he comes home to await the verdict. When the play is rejected Eugene is grievously distressed, but finally goes to New York where he takes a job teaching at the School for Utility Cultures.³⁷ His battles there with his students are

agonizing, and while he learns much, he hates his work. Finally he is enabled to go for a trip to Europe. He stays in England for a time, then goes to France, where he wanders about until he encounters his friend Starwick and two women friends.³⁸ He tours France with them, at first pleasurably, and then his friendship with Starwick wears thin, and after considerable anguish Eugene realizes that Starwick is a homosexual and that the girl that Eugene wants loves Starwick. Eugene tears himself away from his companions³⁹ and settles down in South France, where the turbulence of the past months is followed by a period of calm, during which he loses himself in the memories of his childhood in America, and for some time does little except write.⁴⁰ Then, after several amusing adventures in southern France, Eugene prepares to go back to New York. At the boat he meets a woman, named Esther: "Esther was fair; she was fair; she had dove's eyes."⁴¹ And with the promise of return and of liaison ahead of him, the novel closes.

For the third novel, *The Web and the Rock*, we travel back to Asheville, which is now called Libya Hill instead of Altamont, to bring up a new hero, George Webber. George's family is somewhat different from Eugene's. His father and mother have been separated, his mother is dead, and he lives with his Aunt Maw and his mother's relatives. Aunt Maw, however, talks very much like Eliza Gant. At any rate, George grows up much as Eugene did, goes off to school at Pine Rock College, and then heads for New York. At first he lives with friends from Pine Rock, but after a time he takes up separate quarters, where he dreams of love and success in the metropolis.

Abruptly the first half of the book closes, and George suddenly becomes exactly like Eugene Gant and is found on a boat coming back from Europe, with Esther. There then commences a long and passionate romance between George Webber and Esther Jack, who is an older woman of Jewish descent⁴² and an accomplished and successful theatrical designer. George is in love; he is writing his novel, the same one Eugene began in *Of Time and the River*; and the city seems, for the first time, a friendly place. But after awhile he begins to quarrel with his mistress, he has his novel rejected,⁴³ and the city takes on

for him a more hideous aspect than ever.⁴⁴ After repeated estrangements and reunions with Esther, George leaves for Europe, where he stages some epic carousing, winding up in a riot at the *Oktoberfest* in Munich where he is severely injured.⁴⁵ At the very end he thinks back on what has happened and realizes that he has been more or less under the influence of the furies all his life. On this note the novel concludes.

The last novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, finds George Webber a successful author. His novel, "Home To Our Mountains," has been accepted by the James Rodney Company. Meanwhile his Aunt Maw dies and George goes home for the funeral. There he finds his home town gone mad, engaged in a terrific real-estate boom, in which all common sense and reason have been thrown aside in a desperate drive for quick profits.⁴⁶ He also hears his friend Randy Shepperton receive a vicious, threatening tongue-lashing from a "friend," the immediate superior of the company for whom he works. Then George goes back to New York where he attends a party at Esther Jack's palatial apartment. The proceedings are interrupted by fire, however, and the apartment house is evacuated. The fire is symbolic of the stock market crash and of the depression, which strikes New York.

Meanwhile George's book is published, and because it is so autobiographical it is received with a storm of abuse by his Libya Hill friends.⁴⁷ But the depression soon hits Libya Hill, too, and that town becomes far too busy to worry about George. George has become famous, however, to a certain extent, and he soon begins to lose the taste for fame. He moves to Brooklyn, where he observes the ravages of the depression at first hand, and he is overwhelmed by the impact of the misery it causes.⁴⁸ His final decision is to leave the city, which he sees now as negation. He describes the death of a man who must take his own life in order to resume his identity from among the impersonal mass of the inhuman metropolis.

George then goes to England, where he meets a famous writer, Lloyd McHarg, who is Sinclair Lewis,⁴⁹ and who represents the restless, unsatisfied artist as the creature of fame. George finds fame empty, just as he had found love empty, and

after a visit to Germany where he witnesses the rise of Nazism, he sails for home. The novel closes with a long letter to Foxhall Edwards, his former editor. He thanks Edwards for having stuck with him while he worked out his novels, he examines his own career and finds it has been a progression toward social and intellectual maturity, he declares that America is sick but that it can be saved as Germany cannot, and he tells of his faith in the future. (Wolfe wrote a twenty-eight-page, handwritten letter to Maxwell Perkins in 1937, at the time of his break with Charles Scribner's Sons.)⁵⁰ The novel then closes with an often quoted passage in which George says that he has had an intimation that he will die soon, and that he will leave earth for greater knowing, leave his friends for greater loving, and find a land more kind than home, a place "whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending—a wind is rising, and the rivers flow." So the fourth and last completed novel ends.

The Hills Beyond, the ten-chapter fragment of a novel that was to follow this one, describes the early days of the Joyner family, George Webber's maternal ancestors, in the Carolina mountains.

Looking back over the autobiographical career of the protagonists of these four novels, we ask ourselves what is the direction, the meaning of the life described, and our answer is not merely "the discovery of America's unique substance." Though at the close of the last completed novel the protagonist, by now speaking directly in the first person, reiterates his faith in his country, it is evident that it has *not* been primarily a discovery of his native land that has been going on. Indeed, rather than merely discovering America, the protagonists' attitudes toward their country have undergone severe changes. John Peale Bishop has remarked that "as the depression deepened, Wolfe grew more and more distressed. He could no longer consent to the 'greatness of America'; for it was impossible any longer to hold to the myth of progress. . . . And Wolfe was thrown back on man's capacity to endure suffering, both the suffering which he has brought on himself and the suffering

with which others, willing or unwilling, have afflicted him." ⁵¹ In *You Can't Go Home Again* Wolfe rejects the ways of the metropolis, America's largest city. As we shall see, he figuratively destroys it, and puts it behind him. He never really "accepts" the city; the period in *The Web and the Rock* during which George Webber is at peace with the city, with Esther Jack and with the world, is a brief one, and all through it there runs, hardly evident at first, a feeling of unreality, of unease. When soon it rises to the conscious level and George declares war again, we are not too surprised.

The real direction of the four novels, then, has not been toward a discovery of America. Indeed, much has been rejected. At the close of *You Can't Go Home Again* Wolfe tells us that his hero has come to a realization of his country's future greatness and its ability to recover from its sickness. As George explains to Foxhall Edwards, he has become socially conscious at last—as if that were the most important development in his life thus far. But has he? An attitude of social consciousness in the metropolis would involve a firm determination to live in it and, since he is a writer, to work through his books toward the betterment of the lot of city residents. But surely George Webber and Thomas Wolfe do not do this. Wolfe and George head for England and the continent, and then, though George tells Foxhall Edwards that "it is with the present evils that [Man-Alive] is now concerned," Wolfe begins *The Hills Beyond*, which is not concerned with present civic evils at all, but with the historical past of western North Carolina.

If the social consciousness of American life were the only conclusion reached in the four autobiographical novels, it would seem unreal, hard to accept. From the evidence presented in the novels, such a conclusion, as meaning and direction, is quite unsatisfactory and unconvincing. It is not social, but *moral* and *artistic* maturity that George Webber actually attains by the conclusion of *You Can't Go Home Again*. The plot of the four novels has been the search of Eugene-George for a mature acceptance of life; that is the new kind of consciousness that has evolved. What George is ready to accept and

live with at the end is not any "unique and single substance of this land and life of ours," but rather himself, George Webber—Thomas Wolfe.

The four Wolfe novels constitute a progression, sometimes steady, sometimes wavering, toward responsibility—and this not so much to the body politic as to the author's personality itself, the author as man and as artist. The poetic passage with which the last novel concludes is a statement of acceptance of a destiny, whatever it may be.

Thus when we examine the plots of the four novels, we see that to varying degrees they mark stages along the way toward responsibility. *Look Homeward, Angel*, the most compact of the four, represents the artist's birth into a particular home and community and the successive stages of his alienation from it. At the end the young Eugene leaves the town for the city. In *Of Time and the River* he tangles with the world of art, then flees his country to go abroad, and there discovers his unescapable ties with his country. In *The Web and the Rock* he has his romance with the city and a love affair, and then he flees both—the woman's love and the city's ways. In *You Can't Go Home Again* he realizes that neither town nor city, woman or fame, but only his mind can give him peace, and that the direction of flight must not be away from reality but toward the creation of his artistic reality—and that this artistic reality is not one of proud romantic isolation and the storming of heaven by frontal assault, but a reality grounded in morality and personal human responsibility.

And we note, too, that such a progression gives a specific meaning as well to the preoccupation with time and place that runs throughout all the Wolfe novels, and which in the last paragraph of *You Can't Go Home Again* resolves itself into a calm, resolute acceptance of a coming end to life. For in that paragraph the autobiographical protagonist is no longer either contending with time, or fleeing from it in space. In all the novels, as we shall see, George Webber and Eugene Gant have been preoccupied with change, fighting to hold on to what is slipping by as the clock ticks on, striving to accomplish something in the brief span of mortality. Now George Webber is at

last moving *with* time, not battling against it. Surely this accomplishment, too, is part of the picture of artistic objectivity and reality, and of peace of mind, toward which the consciousness and conscience of the novels have been flowing.

The "form" of the Wolfe novels is, therefore, the principle of development that carries the autobiographical protagonist from immaturity toward maturity, from rebellion toward acceptance, from romanticism toward realism. The social consciousness, the discovery of America's true greatness, are both parts of this larger development. It is a progression from an anguished, first-person art toward the kind of artistry represented in *The Hills Beyond*: third person, objective, representational fiction. A progression, in other words, away from autobiography, through autobiography.

Seen this way, the episode of the "Walk Through the Town" in *Look Homeward, Angel* achieves a thematic relevance of greater import than that of simply being an attractive specimen of life in a town's business district. It is a definite point of progress in Eugene Gant's experience. At the time it occurs, Eugene is fourteen. In a very few chapters (and years) he will leave Altamont, first tentatively and only partly, for college at Pulpit Hill, and then into complete exile. The walk through the city represents Eugene's last look at the town through the eyes of a child. In the next two chapters events occur that will transform his perspective utterly. The world war breaks out, his brother Ben finds out that he is seriously ill, Eugene goes on a trip to Charleston where he has his first real adult sex experience in which he almost though not quite takes a young waitress to bed, and after that he learns that his father has cancer. Death, change, and desire will now impinge upon his consciousness.

The walk through the town, therefore, is the last time that Eugene sees his home town without having what he sees involve so strong a personal relevance to his own family and personal problems that he cannot look at Altamont objectively. No longer will Altamont have a life of its own as it does in the twenty-fourth chapter, with Eugene merely looking on with, and for, us. It will hereafter be viewed solely as a part of Eu-

gene's consciousness, and he will see and describe Altamont entirely in terms of the associations it has for him. The walk through the town, then, is an important milestone in the progress of the artist; from the time that it occurs, Eugene's progression toward the conclusion of the first novel, in which he will leave the town for the metropolis, is measurably faster. The walk is Eugene Gant's, and Thomas Wolfe's, last look at Altamont in tranquillity: and ours, too.

We can see this scene from *Look Homeward, Angel* in this light, and can realize its definite and fixed thematic relevance to the total form, but we should find it difficult to point to many such scenes in the next three novels that fill so clearly drawn a role. The progress in these later novels is slower, clouded, stretched out so that it is often impossible to single out any one episode and to say that it represents this or that stage in the artist's journey. Has the artist of *Of Time and the River* ever really rejected America, for instance, so that his rediscovery of his love for it in the last few chapters of the novel shows any real dramatic finality? The rediscovery seems forced, unconvincing. It fails to give to the novel the emphatic, developed conclusion it needs. And the rejection of Esther and love in *The Web and the Rock* is a long drawn out affair, with various vicissitudes, and Esther and the city are both rejected time and time again, only to be taken back. By the time the final spurning comes, and George actually does get on the boat and leave, we have begun to lose interest. The closing scene in that novel does provide a real impact, but it has been long overdue. Similarly, George's rejection of the city—what of it is still left after *The Web and the Rock*—in the last novel, and his flight from fame, are a long time in being precipitated. When eventually he leaves for Europe, after much wordy and uninspired prose, we are almost exhausted. Only in Europe does the pace pick up somewhat, and the autobiographical protagonist begin moving toward his eventual goal again forcefully and in a controlled fashion. And then, when he has seen and condemned fame in England and Nazism in Germany, the final resolution is handled clumsily. Wolfe simply has George Webber write a letter to Foxhall Edwards telling him how he feels. The author thus

drops all pretense of narrative reporting, and all use of the dramatic scene as well.

Why, then, is the "form" of the first novel, involving as it does the progression of the artist toward the first romantic exile from his home, so clearly drawn and firm in its outlines, evident in its parts; and the form of the three novels that follow, describing his movement from romantic conflict with life toward objective acceptance and use of it, so often vague, tentative, and stumbling?

The answer lies in the novels themselves, just as the question is likewise implicit there. What we have in Thomas Wolfe's work is the problem of the shape of autobiographical fiction, and of the steps in working it out. When we talk about Wolfe's career, we are in a very real sense explicating the text of the novels. How does the artist travel from a lyrical toward a dramatic art, from *Look Homeward, Angel* toward *The Hills Beyond*? Here in the four novels is the process, set down as it happens. Because it is autobiographical fiction, its success depends upon the personal success of the writer-protagonist in creating his art. More importantly for us, the process constitutes the plot of the novels.

What will follow is an examination of some of the methods and purposes of Thomas Wolfe's life and work, so that we may seek to understand the use made of autobiographical material by one American writer, the form it took, and what he could and could not achieve with it. In so doing, we shall among other things be explicating the novels themselves.

The Time of Thomas Wolfe

IF the novels of Thomas Wolfe show an autobiographical protagonist contending with life in town and city, the battle is waged on a field which, for all its particularities of place, is far from being fixed and permanent. Everything in the Wolfe novels is changing: the narrator himself, his friends, the life going on around him, the towns and cities in which that life takes place. The theme of all the novels, stories, and plays, whether taken as a whole or piece by piece, is man caught up in time, and more particularly, the manifestation of time in the world, which is change.

From the beginning, Wolfe was preoccupied with change. In *Look Homeward, Angel* the members of the Gant family are shown in contrast with time, fighting against it. We see them as they are born, as they live, and as they die, and their finite careers and time-circumscribed consciousness are contrasted with the earth around them, with the history of man, and with the eternity of time-space.

From at least his twelfth year onward, the Eugene Gant of *Look Homeward, Angel* is acutely conscious of change. And in both Eugene and his creator Thomas Wolfe, this takes the form of an intense awareness of and preoccupation with time. Time—its various facets, its apparent contradictions, its limitations, its dimensions—is the central motif of the Wolfe novels. Not only is it implicit in Eugene Gant's and George Webber's life; it is also on frequent occasions an explicit concern of the author. Wolfe discusses it in *The Story of a Novel*, where he finds a contrast between present and past time, which exist chronologically and progress one into the other, and a kind of "time

immutable," which does not change and which exists in a wry commentary on the changeability of mortal, chronological duration.

The extent to which thoughts of time and change dominated Wolfe's thinking may be seen in certain passages from the four completed novels. At crucial moments in the histories of Eugene Gant and George Webber, the thoughts of time and change appear inevitably, serving to add another dimension to the problem. Before we begin the work of analyzing what time and change meant to Thomas Wolfe, and in what terms he conceived of them, let us examine some of the ways in which thoughts of time crop up in the four novels and in the autobiographical statement of purpose, *The Story of a Novel*.

In this work, Wolfe declares that "dreams of guilt and time" tormented his sleeping hours as well as dominated his waking days. He tells of one such dream in which the sum total of all his experience—"my daily conflict with Amount and Number, the huge accumulations of my years of struggle with the forms of life"—would present itself before him:

And the fruit of that enormous triumph, the calm and instant passivity of that inhuman and demented immortality, was somehow sadder and more bitter than the most galling bitterness of defeat in my contention with the multitudes of life had ever been.

For above that universe of dreams there shone forever a tranquil, muted, and unchanging light of time. And through the traffic of those thronging crowds—whose faces, whose whole united and divided life was now instantly and without an effort of the will, my own—there rose forever the sad, unceasing murmurs of the body of this life, the vast recessive fadings of the shadow of man's death that breathes forever with its dirgelike sigh around the huge shores of the world.¹

The passage shows clearly how Wolfe thought of chronological time as existing in ironic contrast to a much greater kind of duration, which did not change and seemed to mock all of mortal existence, limited as that existence was by change and death. Why should the spirit of mortal be proud? he seemed to be asking, and failing to find a satisfactory answer.

In *Look Homeward, Angel* Wolfe speaks of Old Gant as

having "a tragic consciousness of time—he saw the passionate fulness of his life upon the wane, and he cast about him like a senseless and infuriate beast."² And again, "he knew that the century had gone in which the best part of his life had passed; he felt, more than ever, the strangeness and loneliness of our little adventure on earth: he thought of his childhood on the Dutch farm, the Baltimore days, the aimless drift down the continent, the appalling fixation of his whole life upon a series of accidents."³ Here we find at least three theses about time. First, ^{leaf} the past is irrevocable. Second, ^{stroke} mortal man lives in loneliness and solitude. And third, what purpose there is in life comes about through chance alone, and man is at the mercy of chance.

The motif appears in all the other novels and collections of short stories. In *Of Time and the River*, as he waits for the train that will take him home to his father's death-bed, Eugene Gant hears the noise of time in the railroad station at Boston, "that sound remote and everlasting, distilled out of all the movement, frenzy, and unceasing fury of our unresting lives, and yet itself detached, as calm and imperturbable as the still sad music of humanity, and which, made up out of our million passing lives, is in itself as fixed and everlasting as eternity."⁴ In *The Web and the Rock*, George Webber, looking back on his first three decades, hears a clock strike as he lies in a hospital bed in Munich: "The news it bore to him was that another hour for all men living had gone by, and that all men living now were just that one hour closer to their death; and whether it was the silent presence of the ancient and eternal earth that lay around him—that ancient earth that lay here in the darkness like a beast now drinking steadily, relentlessly, unwearyedly into its depth the rain that fell upon it—he did not know, but suddenly it seemed to him that all man's life was like one small tongue of earth that juts into the waters of time, and that incessantly, steadily, in the darkness, in the night, this tongue of earth was crumbling in the tide, was melting evenly in dark waters."⁵

In *You Can't Go Home Again* George Webber discusses with his friend Randy Shepperton his failure thus far to begin

his second novel: " 'No, I haven't started my new book yet! . . . Thousands of words—' he whacked the battered ledgers with a flattened palm—'hundreds of ideas, dozens of scenes, of scraps, of fragments—but no book! . . . And—' the worried lines about his eyes now deepened—'time goes by! It has almost been five months since the other book was published, and now—' he threw his arms out toward the huge stale chaos of that room with a gesture of exasperated fury—'here I am! Time gets away from me before I know that it has gone! 'Time!' he cried, and smote his fist into his palm and stared before him with a blazing and abstracted eye as though he saw a ghost—'Time!' " ⁶

The sketch entitled "The Men of Old Catawba," in the volume of short pieces entitled *From Death To Morning*, states the theme explicitly:

The real history of Old Catawba is a history of solitude, of the wilderness, and of the eternal earth, it is the history of millions of men living and dying alone in the wilderness, it is the history of the billion unrecorded and forgotten acts and moments of their lives; it is a history of the sun and the moon and the earth, of the sea that feathers eternally against the desolate coasts, and of great trees that smash down in lone solitudes of the wilderness.

The history of Old Catawba is the history of millions of men living alone in the wilderness, it is the history of millions of men who have lived their brief lives in silence upon the everlasting earth, who have listened to the earth and known her million tongues, whose lives were given to the earth, whose bones and flesh are recompact with the earth, the immense and terrible earth that makes no answer.⁷

In the last analysis it is time and nature that provide the permanence in Thomas Wolfe's world, whereas the men who live in it are the victims of impermanence. The Old Catawban living and dying in the wilderness is made and unmade briefly and quickly. He dwells with the wilderness and in it, and the sun and moon and earth and sea and wilderness—"the immense and terrible earth that makes no answer"—all contrast their timelessness to his brevity of flesh and spirit. Even in his twelfth year, Eugene Gant has sensed this in *Look Homeward*,

Angel, when he perceived that the mountains that ringed his home city of Altamont "were the cup of reality, beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change."⁸ Also in that novel there is an interesting passage in which Old Gant sells the stone angel, which has for so long stood outside his shop, to the keeper of the town brothel, Queen Elizabeth. He had always wanted to carve an angel like this one, but he never learned to do it. Now he has sold the angel to adorn the grave of a prostitute. As he walks out the shop with Elizabeth,

all life seemed frozen in a picture: . . . And in that second the slow pulse of the fountain was suspended, life was held, like an arrested gesture, and Gant felt himself alone move deathward in a world of seemings as, in 1910, a man might find himself again in a picture taken on the grounds of the Chicago Fair, when he was thirty and his moustache black, and, noting the bustled ladies and the derbied men fixed in the second's pullulation, remember the dead instant, seek beyond the borders for what was there (he knew); or as a veteran who finds himself upon his elbow near Ulysses Grant, before the march, in pictures of the Civil War, and sees a dead man on a horse; or I should say, like some completed Don, who finds himself again before a tent in Scotland in his youth, and notes a cricket-bat long lost and long forgotten, the face of a poet who has died, and young men and the tutor as they looked that Long Vacation when they read nine hours a day for "Greats."

Where now? Where after? Where then?⁹

Here in a moment of cognition Gant has suddenly been made aware of the relentless progression of time, and of how much of him has receded into the unredeemable past. Similarly, in the last pages of *Look Homeward, Angel*, the fountain on the square freezes into an instant's immobility, and Eugene and his dead brother Ben see all time walk along the square before their eyes:

He saw the billion living of the earth, the thousand billion dead; seas were withered, deserts flooded, mountains drowned; and gods and demons came out of the South, and ruled above the little rocket-flare of centuries, and sank—came to their Northern Lights of death, the muttering death-flared dusk of the completed gods.

But, amid the fumbling march of races to extinction, the giant rhythms of the earth remained. The seasons passed in their majestic processions, and germinal Spring returned forever on the land—new crops, new men, new harvests, and new gods.¹⁰

Once again the earth is triumphant—over all of human history. Races come and go, and the seasons of the earth outlast them all. “Where now? Where after? Where then?” It is the change that is so startling to Wolfe. The sudden look backward involves the momentary rediscovery of elapsed time, and thus a momentary respite from the inexorable wearing away process that is time. In a very real sense, then, Wolfe’s fiction constitutes a search for lost time, very much as did the work of Marcel Proust. But while Proust worked out a detailed theory of the time experience, and wrote his great novel according to the theory, consciously structured by it, Wolfe more or less stumbled into the time experience, and never worked out his ideas very precisely.

Wolfe’s concept of time is given in *The Story of a Novel*. During the writing of *Of Time and the River*, he declares, he was “baffled by a certain time element in the book, by a time relation which could not be escaped, and for which I was now desperately seeking some structural channel.” He envisioned three kinds of time, he tells us. The first was the actual present, in which the narrative advanced and which showed the characters and the events in the act of living and moving forward to an immediate future. The second was the past, “which represented these same characters as acting and being acted upon by all the accumulated impact of man’s experience so that each moment of their lives was conditioned not only by what they had experienced in that moment, but by all that they had experienced up to that moment.” In addition, Wolfe described a third kind of time

which I conceived as being time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth; a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which would be projected the transience of man’s life, the bitter briefness of his day.¹¹

It will be noticed that Wolfe's "time immutable," which paradoxically flows unceasingly, provides the backdrop against which the human and historical actions are projected, and against which their feebleness is rendered so obvious. Wolfe's novels, reflecting as they do this comparison, thus assume the form which Edwin Muir calls the "chronicle novel." In that oddly neglected and brilliant study entitled *The Structure of the Novel*, Muir divides the novel form into three main types: the dramatic novel in which the action is most important and in which the time structure is important only as it relates to the action; the novel of character in which the development is in terms of space rather than time and which achieves its progression through the cumulative revelation of character and situation; and the chronicle novel. In the chronicle novel time is not relative but absolute, and the characters and events are presented against a background of steadily elapsing time. Using *War and Peace* as an example of this kind of novel, Muir declares that the speed of time is not determined by the intensity of the action, but rather has a deadly regularity which is external to and unaffected by the characters and situations. The emphasis is on the aging of the characters, "on the fact that they are twenty now, that they will be thirty, then forty, then fifty, and that in essential respects they will then be like anybody else at twenty, thirty, forty, and fifty." Change in *War and Peace*, Muir continues, is inevitable and general, "it is regular, arithmetical, and in a sense inhuman and featureless":

. . . everything may happen; and everything does happen. The action on the human plane does not unfold inevitably; we do not see a drama contained within itself and building itself up on its own consequences; we see life in all its variety of accidents and inventions, marked off here and there by certain very important milestones, inscribed with different figures which designate the march of an external and universal process. . . .¹²

The novels of Thomas Wolfe, like *War and Peace*, are constructed in accordance with this scheme. Eugene and the other Gants change. The earth does go on unheeding. The difference, however, apart from questions of technique, seems to be that

Tolstoy's characters are seldom very much perturbed by the externality and deadly regularity of the time process. They proceed onward, as the present becomes the past, and the future becomes the present and then in its own turn part of the past, too. Tolstoy's characters exist inside the process, and they view time from within it, whereas Wolfe's novels center around Eugene Gant and George Webber, who are not only aware of time but frequently stand outside of time and are horrified by their plight in it.

The contemplation of nature seemed inevitably to remind Wolfe of his own mortality. Thus, in *The Web and the Rock*, George Webber is living in New York and has had his first novel rejected, and is considerably depressed. Meanwhile, spring has arrived and in the backyard of the house in which he resides a tree is blooming:

And then one day he looked into its heart of sudden and magical green and saw the trembling lights that came and went into it, the hues that deepened, shifted, changed before one's eye to every subtle change of light, each delicate and impalpable breeze, and it was so real, so vivid, so intense that it made a magic and a mystery, evoking the whole poignant dream of time and of man's life upon the earth, and instantly, it seemed to Monk, the tree became coherent with his destiny, and his life was one with all its brevity from birth to death.¹³

The coming of spring thus becomes more terrible by the very beauty of the tree and of nature. It rendered Wolfe more conscious than ever of what he considered his wretched mortal limitations. He goes on to tell of several memories of masculine impotence that he recalled from his youth. They involved men being humiliated and beaten by their wives' lovers, and being too craven to protest. George Webber tells of how as a boy he had sworn that he would never submit to such humiliation, and that he would be ready when the enemy came. But now that April had arrived, he says, it seemed to him that the enemy had come and humiliated him after all, and that he had not recognized the enemy.¹⁴

Thus it is the advent of spring, with its connotations of the

perennial and everlasting rebirth of the seasons, that seems to touch off all his fears and regrets, and his sense of futility in the face of the solstice's ruthless coming, in despite of the petty woes of mortality. Certainly we have here the direct comparison between "time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth" on the one hand, and "the bitter briefness of his days" on the other.

Simultaneously with Wolfe's consciousness of an infinite time above and beyond mortal time, there is a concept of an infinite, unlimited, boundless space. For a man like Wolfe, who is in his work so devoted to the full rendering of a particular place, this might seem unusual. But the fact is that he seemed to envision his space experience on much the same plane as that of time, although this concept is if anything even less explicitly stated than the time concept. One description of it, however, can be found in *Of Time and the River*, when Helen Gant lies in her bedroom with her husband asleep near by, and waits for her father to die:

"My God! My God! What is life about? We are all lying here in ten thousand little towns—waiting, listening, hoping—for what?"

And suddenly, with a feeling of terrible revelation, she saw the strangeness and mystery of man's life; she felt around her in the darkness the presence of ten thousand people, each lying in his bed, naked and alone, united at the heart of night and darkness, and listening, as she, to the sounds of silence and of sleep. And suddenly it seemed to her that she knew all these lonely, strange, and unknown watchers of the night, that she was speaking to them, and they to her, across the fields of sleep, as they had never spoken before, that she knew men now in all their dark and naked loneliness, without falseness and pretense as she had never known them. And it seemed to her that if men would only listen in the darkness, and send the language of their naked lonely spirits across the silence of the night, all of the error, falseness and confusion of their lives would vanish, they would no longer be strangers, and each would find the life he sought and never yet had found.

"If we only could!" she thought. "If we only could!"

Then, as she listened, there was nothing but the huge hush of night and silence, and far away the whistle of a train. Suddenly the phone rang.¹⁵

Earlier in the same novel, in the sequence depicting Eugene Gant's train ride from Altamont to Boston, there are several such statements of the concept of ever-extending, unlimited space. Drunken and reeling with alcohol and the exultation of travel, Eugene imagines the train veering from its northward route through Baltimore, New York, and Boston, and heading westward: "Through Nebraska, boy! Let's shove her through, now, you can do it!—let's run her through Ohio, Kansas, and the unknown plains! Come on, you hogger, let's see the great plains and the fields of wheat— Stop off in Dakota, Minnesota, and the fertile places— Give us a minute while you breathe to put our foot upon it, to feel it spring back with the deep elastic feeling, 8000 miles below, unrolled and lavish, depthless, different from the East."¹⁶ Soon afterward Eugene thinks of the moon as it "blazed down on 18,000 miles of coast, on the million sucks and scoops and hollows of the shore, and on the great wink of the sea, that ate the earth minutely and eternally." He thinks of the entire continent lying asleep.¹⁷

Just as Wolfe's two protagonists envisioned men being born, living, and dying while the seasons rolled on before and after them, unconcerned, so they sometimes thought of millions of other men all around them in space, living and breathing and thinking, and each one of them separated from all others. And beyond them an infinite space stretched out on either side: "Beyond the hills the land bayed out to other hills, to the sea. Forever and forever."¹⁸

Wolfe frequently attempted to convey this sense of the simultaneous coexistence of men in space, through the device of the panoramic description. We have already seen how Helen Gant dreamed of other men and women ranged all around her, each in isolation from each other. In *Look Homeward, Angel* Wolfe occupies one chapter, the fourteenth, with a series of portraits of Altamont residents at dawn. We see Ben Gant leave for work, then we witness a series of short word pictures as various people are described asleep or awake, dead or alive. In another chapter, the twenty-fourth, Eugene Gant and George Graves walk downtown from school, and encounter a

number of persons doing various mundane things, so that we get a sense of a whole community busy with its individual pursuits, all around Eugene Gant.

In opposition to this limitless space, Wolfe frequently imagines a man walled in a single room, in utter isolation from all other small rooms and all other men everywhere. Of George Webber in New York City he says that "Alone, he tried to hold all the hunger and madness of the earth within the limits of a little room, and beat his fists against the walls, only to hurl his body savagely into the streets again, those terrible streets that had neither pause nor curve, nor any door that he could enter."¹⁹ Eugene Gant in *Of Time and the River* "resolved to kill the phantoms of this fear and shame which pressed upon him namelessly, he swore that he should not starve in the midst of plenty, batter his knuckles bloody on the four walls of a little cell, break the great shoulder of his power and strength against a barren wall, prowl ceaselessly and damnably a million sterile streets, in which there was neither pause nor curve nor stay, nor door to enter. . . ." ²⁰ Repeatedly in Wolfe's accounts of his protagonists in the city we get this image of a man caged in a small room and beating his knuckles to blood in futility.

While Wolfe was conscious of space, however, he more often was apt to think in terms of a particular place. Indeed, the two panoramic views of Altamont previously mentioned are attempts at simultaneous portrayal, to be sure, but they are also attempts to present the particular community as a whole. In general Wolfe thought of two places when he thought of Eugene's and George's careers: the town and the city. The town was Asheville, which he called first Altamont and then Libya Hill, the city was New York. In *The Web and the Rock* there is a passage in which he distinguishes between a section and a place. A section, he tells us, is like Park Avenue and the fashionable districts of uptown New York. Such sections "lacked humanity," "brought a sense of desolation," "brought into the soul of man the heartless evocations of a ruthless world," "a world of lives that had no earth in them." A place, on the other hand, is like the East Side of New York, where "people came from, where men were born and lived and worked and sweated

and died." "Place! That was the word he had needed," Wolfe declared, "and now that simple word defined the image of his thought." The East Side, he continued, was not a pleasant place in many ways, and indeed in many respects it was a most unpleasant place. It was, however, a place of life and character and excitement. It had an identity of its own: "Here was the American hope, the wild, nocturnal hope, the hope that has given life to all our poetry, all our prose, all our thoughts, and all our culture—the darkness where our hope grows, out of which the whole of what we are will be conceived."²¹ Earlier in the same novel Wolfe ascribed George Webber's feeling for place to his childhood. "His sense of *place*, the feeling for specific locality that later became so strong in him, came, he thought, from all these associations of his youth—from his overwhelming conviction, or prejudice, that there were 'good' places and 'bad' ones. This feeling was developed so intensely in his childhood that there was hardly a street or a house, a hollow or a slope, a backyard or an alleyway in his own small world that did not bear the color of this prejudice."²²

The meaning and symbolism of Wolfe's two places—Asheville and New York City—will be discussed in a later chapter. Suffice it to say now that the concept of a particular locale is extremely important to his work, that he wrote best when he was centering his narrative in a particular locale, and that along with his sense of place went a feeling of other places, extended laterally into infinite space, in which other men dwelled who were equally circumscribed in space.

One of the recurring images in the body of Wolfe's work is that of the train. There is not a Wolfe novel that does not prominently describe one or more train rides. And what most interested Wolfe in train rides was the sensation he received of keeping pace with time and distance, so that instead of himself being held prisoner in finite time and in one place, it was he who traveled, and the space and time which remained static. "And it was this that awed him—," he writes of Eugene in *Look Homeward, Angel*, "the weird combination of fixity and change, the terrible moment of immobility stamped with eternity in which, passing life at great speed, both the observer and

the observed seem frozen in time. There was one moment of timeless suspension when the land did not move, the train did not move, the slattern in the doorway did not move, he did not move. It was as if God had lifted his baton sharply above the endless orchestration of the seas, and the eternal movement had stopped, suspended in the timeless architecture of the absolute." Or, he continues, it was as if a motion picture of a swimmer making a dive or a horse jumping were to stop:

. . . movement is petrified suddenly in mid-air, the inexorable completion of an act is arrested. Then, completing its parabola, the suspended body plops down into the pool. Only, these images that burnt in him existed without beginning or ending, without the essential structure of time. Fixed in no-time, the slattern vanished, fixed, without a moment of transition.²³

Again, in *Of Time and the River*, Eugene Gant is on the train returning to New York City:

Here then, in this storm-lost desolation of earth and sky the train hung poised as the only motionless and unchanging object, and all things else—the driving and beleaguered moon, the fiercely scudding clouds, the immense regimentation of heaven which stormed onward with the fury of a gigantic and demoniacal cavalry, and the lonely and immortal earth below sweeping past with a vast fan-shaped stroke of field and wood and house—had in them a kind of unchanging changefulness, a spoke-like recurrence which, sweeping past into oblivion, would return as on the upstroke of a wheel to repeat itself with an immutable precision, an unvarying repetition.²⁴

"Wolfe was secure only when he was in motion and never so sure of himself as when he was on a moving train," Margaret Church says.²⁵ And this seems to have been true throughout his life. The last bit of writing that Wolfe did was a journal he kept of a trip through the National Parks of the Far West, which he told his editor would form the basis of a novel²⁶—though he had been working on a very different kind of novel when he took a vacation to make the trip. The diary, which has been published under the title of *A Western Journal*, represents Wolfe at his cumulative worst, but despite its chaotic

nature—it was, after all, only to be the notebook jottings for a book—it provides an unusual look at Wolfe in the process of a trip, set down as it is without more than a few hours' reflection and almost no editing. The diary is interesting in that it contains almost no meditation on what he had seen and done; merely the attempt to remember it (it was written each night after a day of travel). Wolfe seems enthralled by the whole process, and completely unconscious of outside pressures and commitments.

But if an occasional trip on a train or in an automobile seemed to afford Wolfe some surcease from the contemplation of escaping time and unattainable space, still his work in general was dominated by these factors. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, in part of *The Web and the Rock*, in the long story "The Web of Earth," and in various stories and sketches Wolfe is primarily concerned with the remembrance of past time. These works represent his use of memory to summon up the long-ago scenes and incidents of his childhood and to bring them back in words. *Of Time and the River*, the second half of *The Web and the Rock*, *You Can't Go Home Again*, and a number of other stories and sketches involve the recent past, and are presented more nearly in terms of present experience. Wolfe does not seem to be remembering the long ago, but rather attempting to understand and remember his more recent experience. He seems to be attempting to force his recent experience into assimilable form, so that he can catalogue and analyze it in terms of his personality. The early experience apparently came to him whole and self-contained, whereas his attempts to write of his more recent experience and to imbue it with a similar unity and coherence generally resulted in a vague and tenuous mass of emotion, with pages of dialogue and description preceded and followed by twice as many pages again of undigested and expository invocation.

It is precisely this kind of writing that particularly appeals to Wolfe's adolescent following, which constitutes a vast multitude and is probably one reason for the continued and uninterrupted demand for Wolfe's books. The adolescent responds with enthusiasm to Wolfe's customary resort to hyperbole and

bombast whenever he cannot describe something adequately on its own terms. Here is someone who feels as the adolescent does, who does not hesitate to trumpet forth the extreme elation and the ultimate despair at the slightest provocation. One critic has spoken of Wolfe's younger readers as being "intoxicated by the gusto," so that they "accepted it at its face value. They found something epic in its exaggeration, something tonic and awesome about their participation in its emotional excess."²⁷ The easy identification with Wolfe's distraught young heroes produces strophes about Wolfe such as the following:

I looked at the stars—it was late at night, and there were millions of them—and I thought of great men, how there is something big about them, not mere bodily size—it comes from within, something that chafes impatiently at our too-small, too-careful world. I thought how Thomas Wolfe had it, such energy, all those stumbling words. Surely it was of such a man as this that Rostand was thinking when he wrote that speech of Cyrano's: . . .

"I feel

Too strong to war with mortals—BRING ME GIANTS!"²⁸

Wolfe may have deserved better, but unfortunately much of his work, especially in his second and subsequent novels, occasions just that sort of response. And when the reaction sets in and the adolescent reader begins to discard his uncritical adoration of Wolfe's divine frenzy, Wolfe rapidly loses his appeal.

Yet to judge Wolfe in terms of *You Can't Go Home Again* or *Of Time and the River*, instead of *Look Homeward, Angel*, would be as unfair as it would to judge Samuel Butler exclusively by the *Erewhon* novels or Wordsworth by the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* and the *Memorials of a Trip on the Continent* alone. Wolfe's first and best completed novel is for the most part free of the long, windy bombast and the wearying exposition. The Eugene Gant of 1900–20 who grows up in the town of Altamont is a relatively credible young man, and the community in which he grows up is a believable universe. It is not until Eugene boards that train for Boston early in *Of Time*

and the River that he really begins to do battle with the cosmos. And Wolfe himself recognized this. Of Eugene Gant he wrote that

He never knew if fury had lain dormant all those years, had worked secret, silent, like a madness in the blood. But later it would seem to him that fury had first filled his life, exploded, conquered, and possessed him, that he first felt it, saw it, knew the dark illimitable madness of its power, one night years later on a train across Virginia.²⁹

Eugene is so closely autobiographical, however, just as George Webber is; we have previously noted how strongly this is so. And it is the Eugene Gant of all the fury and rhetorical excess who begins the writing of the first novel while living in France in the later chapters of *Of Time and the River*. So that the relative tranquillity and harmony of *Look Homeward, Angel* could not have been the product of a time of unusual contentment for its author, written as it was during the period that Wolfe later and soon afterward described as being so chaotic and furious. We know from his own evidence that the Wolfe who was writing the first novel was far from a calm, well-balanced young man. What then accounts for the objectivity and sense of proportion of that book?

The answer lies, I believe, in the nature of the time experience objectified in that book which gave it its structural form and its textural content. As previously noted, *Look Homeward, Angel* is a novel of the long-ago scenes and incidents of Wolfe's childhood, as relived in memory. Wolfe was recapturing the past. He describes the process in *The Web and the Rock*. We recall how the coming of spring to New York seemed to make him so bitterly conscious of the contrast between mortal life and the time of the seasons, to touch off all his feelings of futility and failure. He also tells us something else of that time:

The first green of the year, and particularly the first green in the city, had a power not only of drawing all the swarming chaos and confusion of the city into one great lyrical harmony of life, it had also such a magical power over all his memories that the life that moved and passed around him became an instant part of all the

moments of his life. So, too, the past became as real as the present, and he lived in the events of twenty years ago with as much intensity and as great a sense of actuality as if they had just occurred. He felt that there was no temporal past or present, no *now* more living than any reality of *then*; the fiction of temporal continuity was destroyed, and his whole life became one piece with the indestructible unity of time and destiny.³⁰

Now this supplanting of the present by the past, and the resulting erasure of the bounds of chronology, occurred at a time when George Webber was feeling thoroughly depressed and miserable, and we read on to find that George's woes increased rather than decreased. Relief, then, seemed to come only when this process of remembering the events of the past was taking place. To escape from the harsh and painful contemplation of the nature of present time and of his own impotence in it, George Webber summoned up remembrance of twenty years ago, when he was a child in Libya Hill. "The quality of my memory is characterized, I believe," Wolfe wrote in *The Story of a Novel*, "in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of its sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness."³¹ The power of "total recall" of the past seems to permit Wolfe to subvert, momentarily at least, the swift flowing passage of time, and to overcome mortal change. We remember the image of the completed Don, in *Look Homeward, Angel*, who sees himself in a photograph taken long ago. For a moment time is erased and the past is recaptured. That this was the method of inspiration for *Look Homeward, Angel* is shown by Wolfe's depiction in *Of Time and the River* of Eugene Gant's activities in France at the time the first novel was begun. He tells of Eugene's stay in the town of Tours:

In a cold, little room in one of the buildings facing on the court, he now settled down, and there began for him one of the most extraordinary and phantasmal time-experiences of his life. Day passed into night, night merged into day again like the unbroken weaving of a magic web, and he stayed on, week after week, plunged in a strange and legendary spell of time that seemed suspended and de-

tached from the world of measurable event, fixed in unmoving moment, unsilent silence, changeless change. . . .

Day and night now, from dawn to dark, from sleeping until waking, in that strange spell of time and silence that was neither dream nor sleep nor waking vision, but that like an enchantment was miraculously composed of all, obsessed as a man exiled, banished, or condemned by fate to live upon a desert island without possibility of escape or return—he thought of home.

For the first time, Wolfe continues, he began to write, and he produced thousands of words, at breakneck speed and at terrible effort. "And in those words was packed the whole image of his bitter homelessness, his intolerable desire, his madened longing for return." ³²

The result was the material from which *Look Homeward, Angel* was constructed. "Like Mr. Joyce," Wolfe declared in *The Story of a Novel*, "I wrote about things that I had known, the immediate life and experience that had been familiar to me in my childhood. Unlike Mr. Joyce, I had no literary experience. I had never had anything published before. My feeling towards writers, publishers, books, that whole fabulous far-away world, was almost as romantically unreal as when I was a child. And yet my book, the characters with which I had peopled it, the color and the weather of the universe which I had created, had possessed me. . . ." ³³ Wolfe was in his middle and late twenties when he wrote and completed the book, and in if he was dealing with Eugene Gant as a child and a youth. Only toward the very end does Eugene grow near toward manhood, and it so happens that these are the weaker chapters of a novel that is generally of a piece, and without any really poor writing. The scenes in *Look Homeward, Angel* are in truth distinguished for "the color and the weather of the universe" in which they exist, and one recalls a remark made by Eugene Gant much later on, in the story "The Return of the Prodigal" (*The Hills Beyond*), written near the very end of Wolfe's life. Wolfe had finally revisited Asheville after seven years of absence, and to describe the occasion he abandoned George Webber to return to his earlier hero, Eugene Gant. In depicting

Eugene's return to the mountain country, Wolfe wrote that "suddenly Eugene was back in space and color and in time, the weather of his youth was round him, he was home again."³⁴ Space and color and time are what are so conspicuously lacking in the later novels about Eugene Gant and George Webber in New York and Europe, and so abundantly present in the stories of Altamont and Libya Hill. It is when Wolfe wrote about the long-ago past that his work took on those dimensions.

We have seen that Wolfe frequently alludes to the process of total recall of the past. But while *Look Homeward, Angel* is the embodiment of the fruits of that process, the actual process itself is set forth in detail in a long story entitled "The Lost Boy," and contained in the posthumous collection *The Hills Beyond*. Just as in "The Return of the Prodigal," Wolfe reverted to Eugene Gant for this tale, which along with "The Web of Earth" is perhaps Wolfe's most perfectly formed work in the short story form. The story was evidently written in the middle 1930's, following a visit in 1935 to St. Louis, Missouri, where the Wolfe family had lived during the summer of 1904 and Mrs. Wolfe had operated a boardinghouse for Asheville residents visiting the St. Louis Exposition.³⁵

During the summer of 1904, we remember from *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eliza Gant traveled with her family from Altamont to St. Louis for the fair. Eugene Gant was four years old at the time, and his brother Grover was twelve. At the fair Grover contracted typhoid fever and died. He is "The Lost Boy"—or seems to be at first—and the story consists of Eugene's (and Wolfe's) attempt to remember him and the time of his death. It is divided into four parts: The Father, The Mother, The Sister, and The Brother.

The progression of the story is toward Eugene Gant's recall of his brother and of his brother's death, and toward Eugene's recapture of how he felt and thought and saw things in his fourth year. The first part, The Father, is a story of Grover in Altamont, as he is accused of stealing by a shopkeeper, and of his father coming to Grover's defense. The point of view is Grover's, and at the end Grover seems to see himself and the

moment in a perspective: "'This is time,' thought Grover. 'Here is the Square, here is my father's shop, and here am I.' " The section concludes as Grover sees a buggy driven through the Square, bearing a poster with the words "St. Louis" and "Excursion" and "The Fair." Eugene does not appear; the episode is evidently something that had been told to him. In form and point of view it is furthest from Eugene's consciousness.

In the second episode, *The Mother*, Eugene's mother tells him about the trip to St. Louis on the train. It is a monologue, told entirely by Eliza Gant, who describes Grover on the trip, and how he conversed with a man on the seat next to him. In the third episode, *The Sister*, the narrator is Helen Gant, Eugene's sister. Helen, who was close to Grover's age, tells Eugene about her adventures with Grover in St. Louis, and the circumstances of his death. Helen's narrative is much more reflective than either of the previous two. She meditates on the passage of time since the St. Louis days, and marvels at the way things turn out for all of them:

My God, I wish I knew the answer to these things. I'd like to find out what is wrong—what has changed since then—and if we have the same queer look in our eyes, too. Does it happen to us all, to everyone? . . . Grover and Ben, Steve, Daisy, Luke, and me—all standing there before that house on Woodson Street in Altamont—there we are, and you see the way we were—and how it all gets lost. What is it, anyway, that people lose?

How is it that nothing turns out the way we thought it would be? It all gets lost until it seems that it has never happened—that it is something we dreamed somewhere. . . . You see what I mean? . . . It seems that it must be something we heard somewhere—that it happened to someone else. And then it all comes back again.³⁶

She goes on to describe the same sensation of the past recaptured in its particularity that Eugene has mentioned in *Look Homeward, Angel* and in *Of Time and the River*, and George Webber in *The Web and the Rock*: "You remember the way it felt, the way it smelled, even the strange smell in the old pantry in that house we lived in then. And the steps before the house, the way the rooms looked. . . . It all comes back as if it happened yesterday. And then it goes away again, and seems

farther off and stranger than if it happened in a dream.”³⁷ Eugene is closer to it now; his sister has told him about Grover and the St. Louis days in terms that he can understand. But one more last step remains, and that is for Eugene himself to remember it. And that he can only do for himself.

Thus the last section, *The Brother*, is Eugene’s own experience, and Eugene is Thomas Wolfe. The section is the account of the visit Wolfe made, thirty years later, to the house in St. Louis where the family lived during the summer of the fair. The name of the street on which the house was located had since been changed, but eventually Eugene Gant finds it:

And so at last he turned into the street, finding the place where the two corners met, the huddled block, the turret, and the steps, and paused a moment, looking back, as if the street were Time.

For a moment he stood there, waiting—for a word, and for a door to open, and for the child to come. He waited, but no words were spoken; no one came. . . .³⁸

Eugene stands outside and remembers the sights, shapes, sounds, and smells of thirty years ago. The scene was exactly as he had remembered it, except that now all he can do is *see* it: the smell and sound and feel of thirty years ago are gone, and he can only remember how they were. He introduces himself to the woman on the porch of the house, who invites him to come inside and look around. The interior is just as it had been in 1904: “the stairs, the hallway, the sliding doors, the window of stained glass upon the stairs.” What is missing is a sense of absence—the absence of his brother Grover and his family away at the fair, and a feeling of presence—the presence of the child Eugene waiting on the stairs for Grover and the family to come home:

It was all the same except that as a child he had sat there feeling things were *Somewhere*—and now he *knew*. He had sat there feeling that a vast and sultry river was somewhere—and now he knew! He had sat there wondering what King’s Highway was, where it began, and where it ended—now he knew! He had sat there haunted by the magic word “downtown”—now he knew!—and by

the street car, after it had gone—and by all the things that came and went and came again, like the cloud shadows passing in a wood, that never could be recaptured.

And he felt that if he could only sit there on the stairs once more, in solitude and absence in the afternoon, he would be able to get it back again. Then would he be able to remember all that he had seen and been—the brief sum of himself, the universe of his four years, with all the light of Time upon it—that universe which was so short to measure, and yet so far, so endless, to remember. Then would he be able to see his own small face again, pooled in the dark mirror of the hall, and discover there in his quiet three-years' self the lone integrity of "I," knowing: "Here is the House, and here House listening; here is Absence, Absence in the afternoon; and here in this House, this absence, is my core, my kernel—here am I!"³⁹

But Eugene then reflects that even if he were able to recapture for the moment "The lone integrity of 'I,'" that realization would be gone almost as soon as it came: "going like faces in a dream—coming, going, coming, possessed and held but never captured, like lost voices in the mountains long ago. . . ." So he continues his tour of the house, until he sees the room in which Grover died, and talks with the present occupant of the house about it. " 'I guess you don't remember much about him, do you? I shouldn't think you would,' " she remarks. " 'No, not much,' " Eugene answers. And then there comes back a scene that summer in which Grover had been talking to him:

The years dropped off like fallen leaves: the face came back again—the soft dark oval, the dark eyes, the soft brown berry on the neck, the raven hair, all bending down, approaching—the whole appearing to him ghost-wise, intent and instant.

"Now say it—*Grover!*"

"Gova."

"No—not Gova—*Grover!* . . . Say it!"

"Gova."

"Ah-h—you didn't say it. You said Gova. *Grover*—now say it!"

"Gova."

"Look, I tell you what I'll do if you say it right. Would you like to go down to King's Highway? Would you like Grover to set

you up? All right, then. If you say Grover and say it right, I'll take you to King's Highway and set you up to ice cream. Now say it right—*Grover!*”

“Gova.”

“Ah-h, you-u. You're the craziest little old boy I ever did see. Can't you even say Grover?”

“Gova.”

“Ah-h, you-u. Old Tongue-Tie, that's what you are. . . . Well, come on, then. I'll set you up anyway.”

It all came back, and faded, and was lost again. Eugene turned to go, and thanked the woman and said good-bye.

Eugene leaves the house. “And again he was in the street, and found the place where the corners met, and for the last time turned to see where Time had gone.” He realizes that it has all vanished, vanished in time, and that the lost boy Grover was gone forever—and the lost boy Eugene, the four-year-old child, as well.⁴⁰ So that the real “lost boy” is not so much Eugene's dead brother as it is Eugene himself, the child, who is lost in time.

Embodied in fiction rather than stated in expository form, Wolfe's rendering of the time experience here is reminiscent of that of Proust. Through the physical sensation of sitting on the stairs, he felt, it would be possible for him to escape from the distortions and blurrings of thirty years of elapsed time and to recapture his past. Thus he could get back into a time when, as with the Eugene Gant of *Look Homeward, Angel* in his sixth year, it would be possible to say that “his sensory equipment was so complete that at the moment of perception of a single thing, the whole background of color, warmth, odor, sound, taste established itself, so that later, the breath of hot dandelion brought back the grass-warm banks of Spring, a day, a place, the rustling of young leaves, or the page of a book, the thin exotic smell of tangerine, the wintry bite of great apples. . . .”⁴¹ He would regain momentarily the knowledge, which the child of four had possessed, of “the lone integrity of ‘I.’” Proust has outlined his theory as follows, in “The Past Recaptured”:

. . . let a sound already heard or an odour caught in bygone years be sensed anew, simultaneously in the present and the past, real without being of the present moment, ideal but not abstract, and immediately the permanent essence of things, usually concealed, is set free and our true self, which had long seemed dead but was not dead in other ways, awakes, takes on fresh life as it receives the celestial nourishment brought to it.⁴²

The remembrance of a minute "released from the chronological order of time" recreates for Proust the human being similarly released to enjoy the minute. For such a person, Proust declares, the word death would have no meaning: "situated outside the scope of time, what could he fear from the future?"⁴³

Eugene Gant sensed that if he were to seat himself on the staircase in the dark hall of the house in St. Louis he would be able momentarily to flee the time-world of appearance into the realm of essence: "my core, my kernel—here am 'I'!" Likewise, Marcel Proust felt that through the recurrence of a physical sensation, such as tasting again a *madeleine*, or standing on uneven cobblestones that recalled the feel of similar cobblestones in Venice, he would be able to step outside the realm of time for the moment and into the contemplation of eternity.

The sense of recapture, however, is soon lost. "This illusion, which brought close to me a moment from the past, incompatible with the present, never lasted any length of time," Proust wrote. Wolfe spoke too of the moment of awareness going, "going like faces in a dream—coming, going, coming, possessed and held but never captured, like lost voices in the mountains long ago." Elsewhere, however, we have noted that the sense of the long ago past displacing the present, becoming one with it, would last imaginatively for long periods, and it seems to have been during these periods that Thomas Wolfe wrote much of *Look Homeward, Angel*.

The English critic Desmond MacCarthy has written of James Joyce that "Nothing is more obvious in his work than its entire dependence on early impressions, preserved in a memory of unrivaled vividness and exactitude. Dublin, Dublin, Dublin—it never gets away from what Joyce saw and felt

in Dublin in boyhood and youth. Nothing happened to him—as an artist—after that; no further experience enriched his imagination or widened the range of his sympathies. Most writers sooner or later put up the shutters, so to speak, and live upon previous accumulations; but this happened very early with Joyce.”⁴⁴ One could wish that the same had been true of Thomas Wolfe, because while Wolfe had a great deal to say about his adult experiences, he never wrote anything about the post-Asheville days that could compare artistically with *Look Homeward, Angel* and certain other short pieces about the people and events of his childhood.

The fact is, however, that given Thomas Wolfe’s kind of sensibility and approach to fiction, it would have been impossible for him to write another novel like *Look Homeward, Angel*. The novel had for all practical purposes exhausted the material; it was the autobiography of his childhood, and he had only one childhood. It was not until the very end of his life that he could turn back to the Carolina mountains as material for the locale of a novel, and then it was a very different kind of novel and a very different kind of turning back. The ten completed chapters of *The Hills Beyond*, on which Wolfe had been working just before his last trip to the West that ended with his death, are not autobiographical fiction. They proceed from no vision of a recaptured past; no method of recollection of the past is involved. With *The Hills Beyond* Wolfe was embarking on a new experience: the dramatic creation of fiction, rather than the recreation of personal history in the guise of fiction.

Before he could do that, however, some eight years were to intervene during which he completed one novel, *Of Time and the River*, and delivered to his publisher the huge manuscript from which the two posthumous novels, *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can’t Go Home Again*, were extracted. Like *Look Homeward, Angel*, the three subsequent novels were autobiographical. Except for a portion of *The Web and the Rock*, however, they do not deal with the events of Wolfe’s childhood. Again with the exception of that portion, at no time is the gap between the author and his autobiographical

protagonists more than ten years in time, and usually less than that. Furthermore, the ten years are adult years; in *Look Homeward, Angel* the protagonist had been a child and youth and the author an adult, so that there was a perspective there that was missing subsequently.

Equally as important as the artistic perspective is the fact that the three novels that followed *Look Homeward, Angel* exhibit a sharp decline in the quality of the recall. With a few exceptions the individual scenes are not as vivid, the characters not nearly so believable. We have seen that Wolfe has remarked that "the quality of my memory is characterized, I believe, in a more than ordinary degree by the intensity of the sense impressions, its power to evoke and bring back the odors, sounds, colors, shapes, and feel of things with concrete vividness." But this becomes less so in the three novels about his adult career, and Wolfe tends more and more to substitute an uneven conglomerate of various scenes and long passages of pseudo-philosophizing (at which Wolfe was not particularly good) for the contained and complete entities that are chapters in *Look Homeward, Angel*. Indeed, by the time we get to *You Can't Go Home Again*, it becomes almost inaccurate to refer to the result as a "novel" at all; the book is simply a collection of scenes interspersed with sermons, and followed by a long letter to Foxhall Edwards (a thin disguising of Maxwell Perkins, Wolfe's first editor) in which all the pretenses of fiction are discarded and the first person singular is utilized.⁴⁵

It is fair to say, then, that Wolfe's later novels do not represent, as *Look Homeward, Angel* does, the past recaptured. They are not, so to speak, frozen time, in which the fountain abruptly ceases its flow and the scene is arrested in motion. For one thing, the past was not yet sufficiently distant from the present to permit its recapture. For another, Wolfe did not remember the recent past as well as that of his childhood. Wolfe seemed to be attempting to arrest the present and force it into the patterns of his more remote past. But if the past is in time, then the present moment is in space, not in time. It would not come back, the way Wolfe liked to bring the past back. That was a mistake that James Joyce did not make.

Intimations of Immortality

AT the conclusion of *The Web and the Rock*, George Webber stands in front of a mirror in a hospital room in Munich, Germany. He had gone abroad after the long love affair with Esther Jack had worn him out physically and mentally, and the recurring quarrels and anguished reconciliations become unendurable. After a visit to France, George had gone to Germany, where he had stayed for some time. Finally he had become involved in a drunken brawl at the *Oktoberfest* and had received several deep wounds of the scalp. Now, after some days of recuperation, he regarded his visage in the mirror:

Out of the dark pool of the looking glass, the Thing hinged forward at the waist, the trunk foreshortened, the thick neck sunken in the hulking shoulders, the barrel contours of the chest, the big paw clasped around the knee. So was he made, so fashioned.

And what nature had invented, human effort had improved. In the dark pool of the mirror the Thing was more grotesque and simian than it had ever been. . . . Not since childhood had he looked so much the part the boys had made for him—the "Monk."

He looked at it now, and it at him, with a quizzical, detached objectiveness, not as a child looks in a mirror, at the silent eloquence of his pooled self, unspeaking, saying "I", but outside of it, and opposite, regardant, thinking, "Well, by God, *you* are a pretty sight!"—and meaning, not *Himself*, but It.¹

Here again, just as in the scene inside the house in St. Louis described in "The Lost Boy," we find the image of the dark pool of the mirror, and the purpose is similar. The mirror stops time. It arrests in mid-moment the flow of experience,

and causes a separation of the individual into a kind of "essence," which he calls Man, and "accidence," which he calls Body. We remember that in "The Lost Boy" Eugene Gant thought that if he were to seat himself on the staircase again he would be able to "remember all that he had seen and been—the brief sum of himself, the universe of his four years, with all the light of Time upon it . . ." He would be able "to see his own small face again, pooled in the dark mirror of the hall, and peer once again into the grave eyes of the child that he had been," and could thus know that "here in this House, this Absence, is my core, my kernel—here am I!"² By peering into "the dark mirror of the hall" the adult Eugene Gant could reach back through elapsed time and recover knowledge of "the lone integrity of 'I'" possessed when he was a child. The world of temporal continuity would therefore be subverted, and his essential self, hidden from the adult Eugene by the accretions and distortions of thirty years of accumulative experience in time, would for the moment be regained.

In the forty-fifth chapter of *The Web and the Rock*, while George Webber is in Paris, the mirror motif appears as George is walking in the Rue St. Honoré. He sees his face reflected in a store window, "and in a second, as if a lock were shot back in his memory, a door is opened and three years of living drop away from him and he is a youth, amorous of the earth and full of wonder and exultancy, who is in a strange land for the first time and who passed this way once and looked into this window." For a moment George sees "the lost youth staring through the coarsened mask, and he sees what time has done." Then the image dies, and George reflects on "the mystery and sadness of the human destiny."

He notes the day. It is the thirtieth of July, 1928.

Time! Time! Time!

He passes on.³

The dark pool of the looking glass in the Munich hospital, however, accomplishes the same purpose in a fashion somewhat different from either the mirror in the Rue St. Honoré or that in the house in St. Louis. Looking into its image, George

Webber is enabled to see not so much "the lost youth" and "the lone integrity of 'I,'"—"my core, my kernel, here am I!"—as he is to see "the Thing," "the Body." What is outside and reflected in the mirror is not the essential spiritual self, but that which is accidental and flesh. George Webber is able to stand "outside of it, and opposite, regardant, thinking, 'Well, by God, *you* are a pretty sight!'"—and meaning, not *Himself*, but *It*." Wolfe remarks: "His naked spirit had stepped out of its rude residence, and this clothing of naked flesh and bone now stared back at it." ⁴ In either case, however, the same purpose is accomplished: the division of the individual into two parts, one embodying the human being who has existed in time and who embodies his accumulated experience; and the other a kind of essence, a real spiritual self which had been hidden behind the accretions of experience in time.

As George gazes at the Thing in the hospital mirror, the awareness of the two personalities within him comes with startling impact. His first impulse is to grin. "Christ! What a mug!" he exclaims.

It grinned back crookedly through its battered mask; and suddenly—all pride and vanity destroyed—he laughed. The battered mask laughed with him, and at last his soul was free. He was a man.⁵

The implication is that not until George Webber was able to comprehend the difference between the "lone integrity of 'I'" and the physical self existing in time, was he a normal man. The dialogue and commentary which follow, and which conclude *The Web and the Rock*, develop this idea. Body first chides Man for his romantic poseuring:

"The Finer Things," said Body dryly. "Yes, I know!—But to proceed: blue eyes, a Roman nose, a classic brow, the profile of a young Greek god—Byron, in short, without the limp or fatness—the ladies' darling, and a genius to boot!"

"Now, Body, damn your soul!"

"I have no soul," said Body dryly. "That's for '*Artists*'—is that the word?" it leered.

"Don't you sneer!"

"The soul is for Great Lovers," Body said. "My soul is suspended down below the waist. True, it has served you in your own more soulful flights—we won't go into that," said Body wryly. "I'm just a millstone round your neck—an accident."

And for a moment more they stared there at each other; then they grinned.⁶

George Webber continues to reflect on his dual self. He had always hated and denied his Body because it had been unable to keep pace with his appetite for sensory experience, and had increasingly lagged behind in its receptivity of life in present time: "He despised it because its powers of smell, taste, sight, sound and touch let slip forever, as all flesh must, the final, potent, and completest distillation of life, the matchless ecstasy of living. . . . He had cursed it because it could not do the inhuman task set for it, hated it because its hunger could not match his hunger, which was for the earth and all things living in it."⁷ "Under the terrible lash of his insatiate thirst and hunger," he had driven his body harder and harder because it had been increasingly unable to transmit immediately and completely to the essential self the full sensory impact of the experience it had been undergoing. The incapacity of the Body to absorb life had caused George Webber to force Body beyond its capacities, and the result had been the anxiety, longing, and frustration that had made him feel that it would be necessary for him to devour the entire earth to keep himself satisfied. He had been unable to accept the kind of counsel that Esther Jack would give him: "Tell me what there is that I can do about it—and I'll help you. I'll show you the clear design, the thread of gold, and you must always stick to it! I'll show you how to get it out of you. I'll not let you lose the pure gold that you have in you below a mass of false and evil things. I'll not let you throw your life away on drunkenness and wandering and cheap women and low brothels. Tell me what it is and I will help you."⁸

Esther's plea went unheeded, because George could not afford to admit to himself that there were virtues in restraint and control. To do so would be to admit that there were limitations to experience. Instead George has been driven by the

hunger for quantity which is ever the hallmark of the Wolfean hero. Earlier in the novel we had been told how "In the blind lashings of his fury, he strove with all the sinews of his heart and spirit trying to master, to devour, and utterly to possess the great, the million-footed, the invincible and unceasing city."⁹ And the first Wolfean hero, Eugene Gant, had to even a greater degree been given to this lust for complete omnivorous experience:

He would write down enormous charts and plans and projects of all that he proposed to do in life—a program of work and living which would have exhausted the energies of 10,000 men. He would get up in the middle of the night to scrawl down insane catalogs of all that he had seen and done:—the number of books he had read, the number of miles he had traveled, the number of people he had known, the number of women he had slept with, the number of meals he had eaten, the number of towns he had visited, the number of states he had been in.

And at one moment he would gloat and chuckle over these stupendous lists like a miser gloating over his hoard, only to groan bitterly with despair the next moment, and to beat his head against the wall, as he remembered the overwhelming amount of all that he had not seen or done, or known.¹⁰

The result of this seemingly insatiable quest for complete quantitative experience had only been greater anxiety than before, and more discontent than ever. George refers to such anxiety and discontent as "the brute, compulsive Worm that here, within the ventricles of night, keeps working always, and that will not let me sleep." In the dialogue between Man and Body at the conclusion to *The Web and the Rock*, the origins of the Worm are discussed. "Somewhere, somewhere begun—where? when? Was that the Worm?" The beginning of the Worm were sometime long ago, Man and Body agree. During childhood, "perhaps with sunlight on the porch," when all sensory life was immediate and complete and the body could transmit with almost completely faithful receptivity the impulses of the senses to the soul; that was when the Worm first appeared to cause uneasiness to the child George." "And were you there?" Man asks Body. "Ay!" Body answers, "to the

limits of mortality." "And to the pits of time and memory?" Man asks. "Not so," Body replies. "That was *your* part—here were the first intrusions of the blind, compulsive Worm. But I was there, was *there*—aye, fat-legged in a wicker basket, feeling light."

"Lights going, lights returning—sadness, hope—" Man remarks. "Yours, *yours*—" Body insists, "the sickness of the Worm—not mine! Mine the Sun!" The Body is emphatic in denying any role in the formation of the Worm of anxiety, because Body's task has been merely to experience sensory life, not to reflect upon it or to exercise any censorship or control. Only so far as mortal physical existence was concerned was Body responsible; to Man and not to Body belong "the pits of time and memory." When Body felt pain, it was physical discomfort only: "When I was filthy and befouled, nasty, wet, sour-bellied, — upon! Would howl! Would howl!—Yes! Would howl for comfort, warmth, appeasement, a full belly, a warm bottom—sun!" And when once the physical discomfort had been alleviated, "No more, no more. The plain Immediate. That was the good time then." ¹¹

What Body and Man both agree upon is that the best time was childhood when the anxious Worm was barely, if at all, in evidence, and the union of the physical Body in experience and the essential Man of spirit was most nearly perfect. Wolfe no less than Marcel Proust conceived of the small child as being closest to pure essence, with its senses only beginning to be cluttered and encumbered with the debris of experience in time. The stresses and strains which condition the "lone integrity of 'I'" in the course of life in time are not yet so cumbersome as to hamper the vision and distort the reason so that the senses can no longer transmit to the spirit the sound, shape, smell, sight, and taste of experience. The child is closer to the Plain Immediate, first things are still first, and the physical universe can still impress itself almost in its entirety upon the consciousness. Thus, looking at his uncle's house early in *The Web and the Rock*,

George Webber saw it, and he knew that this was the way things were. He watched the sunlight come and go, across backyards with

all their tangle of familiar things; he saw the hills against the eastern side of town, sweet green, a little mottled, so common, homely, and familiar, and, when remembered later, wonderful, the way things are.

George Webber had good eyes, a sound body, he was twelve years old. He had a wonderful nose, a marvelous sense of smell, nothing fooled him. He lay there in the grass before his uncle's house, thinking: "This is the way things are. Here is the grass, so green and coarse, so sweet and delicate, but with some brown rubble in it. There are the houses all along the street, the concrete blocks of walls, somehow so dreary, ugly, yet familiar, the slate roofs and the shingles, the lawns, the hedges and the gables, the backyards with their accidental structures of so many little and familiar things as hen houses, barns. All common and familiar as my breath, all accidental as the strings of blind chance, yet all somehow fore-ordered as a destiny: the way they are, because they are the way they are!"¹²

The dialogue that concludes *The Web and the Rock* ends as Body and Man enumerate the facets of childhood and the time of awareness of Things As They Are. Man lists various items, but Body is careful to disown any role other than the physical; thus when Man continues, "the sudden, brooding stretch of absence of the street car after it had gone, and a feeling touched with desolation hoping noon would come," Body quickly interrupts: "That was your own—the turnings of the Worm." Body is insistent upon the innocence of the physical, and insistent that what there was of anxiety in the child was supplied by the essential, spiritual self.

In his essence and accident theories, Wolfe is close to William Wordsworth's child as father to the man. Wolfe claims to have thought more highly of Coleridge than of Wordsworth as a poet, but one searches in vain for anything like the quantitative or qualitative echoings of Coleridge that we find of Wordsworth in the Wolfe novels. Wolfe's acquaintance with the work of both men, of course, was of early standing. In *Look Homeward, Angel* he remarks of Eugene Gant that "the shorter Wordsworth pieces he had read at grammar school . . . but Margaret read him the sonnets and made him commit 'The world is too much with us' to memory. Her face trembled

and grew low with passion when she read it." ¹³ At Harvard Wolfe studied the Romantic poets under John Livingston Lowes, who earnestly advised him to give up his plans for creative writing and to work toward the doctorate and enter the teaching profession. The strong fascination exercised on Wolfe by Professor Lowes, who was at work on his great Coleridge study *The Road to Xanadu* at the time, is pointed out by Richard S. Kennedy in his essay "Wolfe's Harvard Years." ¹⁴ How highly Lowes in turn regarded Wolfe can be seen in the recommendation he wrote in support of Wolfe's application for a teaching position at New York University: "A student of very distinct ability who can bury himself in a subject and can come out with fresh and interesting results. His intelligence is keen and alert, and with a little more discipline will be, I think, an instrument of unusual effectiveness." ¹⁵

Monroe M. Stearns, in his essay "The Metaphysics of Thomas Wolfe," ¹⁶ discusses Wolfe's frequent borrowing of symbols from Wordsworth and Coleridge, including the frequent refrain, "a stone, a leaf, an unfound door," which he rightly remarks that Wolfe certainly derived from Book III of *The Prelude*:

. . . an eye
Which, from a tree, a stone, a withered leaf,
To the broad ocean and the azure heavens
Spangled with kindred multitudes of stars
Could find no surface where its power might sleep. . . .

"Life thus became to Wolfe," Stearns says, "a penance for the sin of having been born and having left that apocalyptic world of Plato, Plotinus, Wordsworth and Coleridge, in which the soul knows its true nature and is free." "The 'stone, leaf, door' refrain," Stearns continues, "symbolizes not only the pain of birth but also those tokens (like Wordsworth's rainbow, rose, tree, and pansy) which remind the mortal of his immortal nature. The 'lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost,' corresponds to the sense of the pre-existence of the soul, which vanishes as the individual advances in material time down the river of corporeal existence."

In *Look Homeward, Angel*, the child Eugene, we are told, had been sent "from one mystery to another: somewhere within or without his consciousness he heard a great bell ringing faintly, as if it sounded undersea, and as he listened, the ghost of memory walked through his mind, and for a moment he felt that he had almost recovered what he had lost."¹⁷ And the notion is further explained in *The Web and the Rock*:

From the first years of coherent memory, George had the sense of the overpowering immanence of the golden life. It seemed to him that he was always on the verge of finding it. In his childhood it was all around him, impending numbly, softly, filling him with an intolerable exultancy of wordless joy. It wrenched his heart with its wild pain of ecstasy and the sinews of his life asunder, but yet it filled his soul with the triumphant sense of instant release, impending discovery—as if a great wall in the air would suddenly be revealed and sundered, as if an enormous door could open slowly, awfully, with the tremendous majesty of an utter and invisible silence. He never found a word for it, but he had a thousand spells and prayers and images that would give it coherence, shape, and meanings that no words could do.¹⁸

In both Wolfe and Wordsworth there is the notion of a kind of Platonic pre-existence,¹⁹ of which "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting; / The soul that rises in us, our life's Star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting, / And cometh from afar." And in both instances the Soul seems to have arrived "Not in entire forgetfulness," but "trailing clouds of glory."

Wolfe did not work out the idea of a state of pre-existence too elaborately; indeed, in other rhetorical flights he will sometimes contradict it completely. But the idea of existence before and after life on earth is a continuing theme in all his work. Thus Ben Gant: "Like Apollo, who did his penance to the high god in the sad house of King Admetus, he came, a god with broken feet, into the gray hovel of this world. And he lived here a stranger, trying to recapture the music of the lost world, trying to recall the great forgotten language, the lost faces, the stone, the leaf, the door."²⁰ And in *Of Time and the River* Old Gant, dying, hears

great footsteps, soft but thunderous, imminent, yet immensely far, a voice well-known, never heard before. He called to it, and then it seemed to answer him; he called to it with faith and joy to give him rescue, strength, and life, and it answered him and told him that all the error, old age, pain and grief of life was nothing but an evil dream; that he who had been lost was found again, that his youth would be restored to him and that he would never die, and that he would find again the path he had not taken long ago in a dark wood.²¹

And perhaps the most often quoted passage in all of Wolfe's work, the conclusion to *You Can't Go Home Again*, reiterates a kind of mystic conviction of immortality:

Something has spoken to me in the night, burning the tapers of the waning year; something has spoken in the night, and told me I shall die, I know not where. Saying,

"To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth—

"—Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending—a wind is rising, and the rivers flow." ²²

Since the life of man on earth, in experience, is in chronological time, the state of pre-existence, and post-existence as well, must be outside of chronological time, and part of the "time immutable, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans and the earth." Here, too, Wolfe is close to Wordsworth. In "Intimations of Immortality" the Romantic poet speaks of the child of six, "thou best philosopher," who "read'st the eternal deep, / Haunted forever by the eternal Mind," and "Over whom thy Immortality / Broods like the Day." The memories of the awareness of immortality in childhood "Have power to make / Our noisy years seem moments in the being / Of the eternal silence: truths that wake, / To perish never." Thus even to the adult "Our souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither; / Can in a moment travel thither— / And see the children sport upon the shore, / And hear the

mighty waters rolling evermore." Similarly, in *The Excursion*, IV, Wordsworth speaks of "an abstract intelligence . . . Whose kingdom is, where time and space are not." And in *The Prelude*, I, he recalls that when "a child, I held unconscious intercourse / With the eternal beauty, drinking in / A pure organic pleasure from the lines / Of curling mist, or from the level plain / Of waters colour'd by the steady clouds."

Wordsworth, as Bowra declares, "believed himself to be immortal because through the objects of sense he had known a lofty exaltation in which he passed beyond time."²³ Thus in *The Prelude*, V, the English poet remarks that "Our childhood sits, / Our simple childhood, sits upon a throne / That hath more power than all the elements"; and this in contrast with an adult life in which "we learn to live / In reconcilment with our stinted powers." Of the passage R. D. Havens states that it implies "that the child's ability to wield remarkable powers is due to its having recently come from a world in which it was free of the manacles of space and time."²⁴

These notions we find frequently in Wolfe's novels. In the dialogue concluding *The Web and the Rock*, Man asks Body whether it was present "to the pits of time and memory," and Body emphatically denies it; "to the limits of mortality," yes, but not beyond that. "That was *your* part—here were the first intrusions of the blind, compulsive worm." It was the essential soul, and not the physical, mortal body, that dealt with time and memory. Body was in present, chronological time alone. Likewise, when Wolfe has Eugene Gant enter "the theater of human events in 1900," he must first resume human history from the arrival upon land of the first amphibians up to annexation of the Transvaal Republic by Great Britain in the month of Eugene's birth, so that Eugene falls heir to all of historical experience when he enters mortal time.

Perhaps the idea is even more firmly voiced in the death scene of Old Gant, in *Of Time and the River*. Shortly before Gant dies, he dreams of his childhood, in the Dutch country of Pennsylvania. Never before have the fields and woods and farms seemed more vivid and lovely to him. He encounters an old acquaintance, a witless man who asks him, "Ain't ye goin' to

stay?" Gant replies that he has a meeting with someone down the road. The someone is a child, who leads him into the woods, until the path splits away into two forks. "Which one shall I take?" Gant asks the child, but receives no reply. He hears a footstep up ahead, and so he chooses one path, but the woods become dark, and gloomy: "And suddenly he knew that he had taken the wrong path, that he was lost. And in his heart there was an immense and quiet sadness, and the dark light of the enormous wood was all around him; no birds sang."

What Gant is lost in is, quite simply, life on earth. He has, as Wolfe remarks elsewhere, begun the process of "error, old age, pain and grief of life" which the great voice he will soon hear at the instant of death will assure him "was nothing but an evil dream." Earlier in the novel, as old Gant had sat in the hospital in Baltimore looking out feebly over the city, he had also thought of his youth: "The old man's land of youth was far away in time, yet now only the magic lonely hills of his life's journey, his wife's people, seemed sorrowful, lonely, lost and strange to him. Now he remembered all places, things, and people in his land of youth as if he had known them instantly and forever!"²⁵

Similarly the description at the beginning of the actual death scene, as he dreams of the Pennsylvania country, is written with the most bright and vivid of phrases, clothed more or less "in celestial delight." To be precise, it is described almost exactly as Wolfe often describes certain moments in the childhood of both Eugene Gant and George Webber, in which moments of time seem suspended and the natural world then stretches forth on all sides in an infinitely rich space, and of which both Man and Body agree in the dialogue closing *The Web and the Rock* that "that was a good time then." Whereas the adult life in chronological time represents the relentless diminution of this rich apperception of the natural world. Only at the instant of death is it regained, as Old Gant remembers the spatial universe of his youth, then sees the child: "And the child still smiled at him from the dark door; the great steps, soft and powerful, came ever closer, and as the instant imminent approach of that last meeting came intolerably near, he

cried out through the lake of jetting blood, 'Here, Father, here!' and heard a strong voice answer him, 'My son!'"

Thus the dying man is the child now, and the child he encounters in his dream was himself when a child; he is father and son both. And just as the child smiles at him from the dark door the great steps come closer, and someone, presumably God, calls to him and takes him. In the four sentences that follow, old Gant dies, and "a blind black fog swam up and closed above his head."

Then, as if to show that the consciousness that was Gant no longer existed as such, the point of view of the episode is artfully switched from that of the dying man, through a transitional sentence of passive verb construction, "And his brain faded into night," into the active consciousness of Eliza Gant, who has been seated by the bedside: "Even before she lowered him back upon the pillows she knew that he was dead."

Part-time mystic that he was, Thomas Wolfe never comes right out with the explicit statement that "I believe in a life before and after our own life on earth. I believe that my essential self came from a timeless immortality into a brief world of finite proportions. While I was a child I remembered it dimly but as I grew older I gradually lost my sense of timeless immortality. But when I die I shall recover what I have lost and become once again a part of immortality and timelessness." Indeed, Wolfe was careful in old Gant's death scene to follow up Gant's reunion with the child and the Father with a physical death scene, and the sentence, "his brain faded into night." Again one is strongly reminded of Wordsworth, and the considerable pains the English poet took later in life to deny the neoplatonic overtones of pre-existence that he placed in the Immortality ode, and to square his position with orthodox Anglican theology. In this he was given support by his friend Coleridge. Yet perhaps Professor Bowra's remarks are, in this particular instance, appropriate for Wolfe as well as Wordsworth, whom he said "was not a man to put ideas into poetry merely because they were suitable for it, nor was he capable of saying as a poet what he did not believe as a man. When he said a thing, he did so because he believed it to be true and

to need saying. It is impossible to read the *Ode* without seeing that when he wrote it, Wordsworth was convinced of pre-existence and of recollections from it in childhood.”²⁶ The evidence is strong that though Thomas Wolfe may have felt the logical necessity to disavow a belief a pre-existence and the supernatural, his instinctive mysticism took artistic precedence over the logic. Perhaps he has dramatized his own feelings in his description of Eugene Gant at Ben’s bedside as his brother dies of pneumonia in *Look Homeward, Angel*:

Eugene stumbled to the other side of the bed and fell upon his knees. He began to pray. He did not believe in God, nor in Heaven or Hell, but he was afraid that they might be true. He did not believe in angels with soft faces and bright wings, but he believed in the dark spirits that hovered above the heads of lonely men. He did not believe in devils or angels, but he believed in Ben’s bright demon to whom he had seen him speak so many times.

Eugene did not believe in these things, but he was afraid they might be true. He was afraid that Ben would get lost again. He felt that no one but he could pray for Ben now: that the dark union of their spirits made only *his* prayers valid. All that he had read in books, all the tranquil wisdom he had professed so glibly in his philosophy course, and the great names of Plato and Plotinus, of Spinoza and Immanuel Kant, of Hegel and Descartes, left him now, under the mastering surge of his wild Celtic superstition. He felt he must pray frantically as long as the little ebbing flicker of breath remained in his brother’s body.

So, with insane sing-song repetition, he began to mutter over and over again: “Whoever You Are, be good to Ben to-night. Show him the way. . . . Whoever You Are, be good to Ben to-night. Show him the way. . . .” He lost count of the minutes, the hours; he heard only the feeble rattle of dying breath, and his wild synchronic prayer.²⁷

And when Ben dies, the author remarks that “We can believe in the nothingness of life, we can believe in the nothingness of death and of life after death—but who can believe in the nothingness of Ben?”

There is the passage that closes *You Can’t Go Home Again*, previously noted, in which Wolfe follows up a long letter from George Webber to Foxhall Edwards (in which he had written

of his life and work and belief and which contained the remark that "man was born to live, to suffer, and to die, and what befalls him is a tragic lot"), with the lines about leaving earth for greater knowing, life for greater life, friends for greater loving, and finding a land "more kind than home, more large than earth." And it is time that is carrying him toward this: "a wind is rising, and the rivers flow," he says, using the same symbols he so frequently used to denote immutable time.²⁸

It is evident, then, that Wolfe did more or less instinctively conceive of life as being a kind of imprisonment in time, and that the "tragic lot" of mortal man consisted of being captured in time: "May it not be that some day from this dream of time, this chronicle of smoke, this strange and bitter miracle of life in which we are the moving and phantasmal figures, we shall wake?"²⁹ Here he questions the very right of precedence of mortal time; one thinks of Wordsworth's remarks to Miss Isabella Fenwick about having to grab hold of walls and trees when a child, to be able to distinguish between the real and the ideal.³⁰

Before and beyond mortal, chronological time is Wolfe's eternal, unchanging universe; and if the child, whose "birth is but a sleep and a forgetting," comes into the mortal world with intimations of immortality and the vision of the golden life, then his chronological life represents a gradual but steady progression into the snares of time, and a corresponding decline in his ability to perceive the celestial delight of the timeless universe as manifested in nature and things as they are. Wordsworth was of course quite explicit about this in the *Immortality Ode*, the basic argument of which is that as the child grows older he loses his vision of the ineffable, so that "there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth"; "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" But Wordsworth proposed that in its place the adult can acquire the consolations of philosophy and the knowledge of mankind derived from a developing moral consciousness. These, with their concept of duty, compensate for the loss of childhood vision.

Thomas Wolfe, however, came to such a conclusion only

belatedly, and never with quite the same sense of satisfaction about it that Wordsworth expresses in his *Ode*.³¹ And before Wolfe achieved the conclusion, he gave vent to his despair in one of the most pathetic, and embarrassing, passages in all his work. It is the chapter entitled "The Parting" in *The Web and the Rock* (pp. 600-15). Whether or not it actually happened—though we have no way of knowing, we may surmise from both Wolfe's account and that of Mrs. Bernstein in *The Journey Down* that something like it did actually take place—it is none the less a grotesque performance, though a tremendously revealing one; and even Esther Jack's amusement over George Webber's rantings cannot gainsay the fact that Wolfe was in dead earnest.

George and Esther have quarreled repeatedly. George's book has been rejected, his own doubts and misgivings about his genius are running high, and his envy and jealousy of Esther's successes as a theatrical designer are at their height. Esther comes to their apartment, all excited about a new play, and finds George morose and despondent. He begins to berate her about her friends, whom he says are mere fakes and esthetes. Esther attempts to reason with him, and George admits his unfairness. "Esther, in God's name, what's gone wrong with me? What's the matter with my life?" he asks. He used to possess so much strength and courage, he says. Now he feels only that he has failed, and he hates life. "By God! An old and worn-out old man at twenty seven!"

"You've worn me out, you mean," Esther tells him. You, she informs George, are "worn-out about the same way that the Hudson River is." But George tells Esther not to "give me any more of that soft soap." He is speaking the truth, he says. "It's not the same with me as it used to be." The things which he has seen he now can see no more.

"God-damn it, woman, don't you understand?" he said furiously. "Haven't you seen it for yourself? Don't you understand I've lost my squeal?" he shouted, beating himself upon the breast and glaring at her with an insane fury. "Don't you know it's been six months since I made my squeal?"

As absurd and comical as these last words were, as incredible

as they might have sounded to a hidden listener, neither of them laughed. Instead, they stood, earnest, combative, and passionately serious, opposing hot, excited faces to each other. She understood him.

Absurd and comical the words are, and embarrassing as well, nor does the long description of George's "squeal" and the occasions on which he had made it, help very much to lessen the absurdity. Yet what Wolfe was talking about in the passage was in actuality something quite close to Wordsworth's "vision and gleam," and it is unfortunate, perhaps, that in *The Web and the Rock* it found so ludicrous an expression. The squeal, George Webber goes on to explain, "was simply a cry of animal exuberance"—at least, that is all it is on page 605. "Since his earliest childhood this tongueless expletive had risen in him in a surge of swelling joy, had collected in his throat and then been torn from his lips in a wild goacry of pain and joy and ecstasy. . . . He had known it ten thousand times in childhood, and it had come to him upon the lights and hues of a million evanescent things: and the whole intolerable good and glory of the immortal earth, the whole intolerable sense of pain and joy, the whole intolerable knowledge of man's briefness on the earth, had been packed, though in what way he did not know, and in what words he could not say, into each moment that the great cry came." ³²

But if this is simply the exuberance of the animal in George, it is curiously described. Wolfe proceeds to enumerate some of the occasions on which the squeal came. They are all moments of full sensory perception: the smell of foods, the sight of rivers after rainstorms, the smells of grocery stores, the sight of a horse standing in a rainstorm: "But most often, more obscurely, from more hidden sources of immense and fathomless exulting the great cry had been torn from him as a child in moments when the picture of abundance was not so clearly painted and where the connecting influences, the limitless evocations of triumph and fulfillment, were not apparent or articulate, but in which the full conviction of his joy had been as strong as when the picture was complete and definite." ³³ And these are mostly Wordsworthian scenes of nature: the passing of clouds,

the sight of woods, the ringing of a bell, the falling of snow, fields at dusk; as well as more modern occasions: the sight of a circus at dawn, the sound of trainsheds. And finally the squeal came at certain moments when George had seen and felt visions of the limitless boundaries of space, in which he could imagine rivers, mountains, plains, deserts, wildernesses, cities, harbors, oceans.

So that by page 610 Wolfe has changed his mind about the squeal being simply animal exhilaration: "And now that he no longer felt the impulse of this savage and uncontrollable cry, it really seemed to him that he had lost out of his life and spirit something precious and incalculable. For he had always known that it was something more than the animal vitality of a boy."

George Webber's cherished squeal was, in fact, his way of responding to something close to what Wordsworth called his "intimations of immortality." An examination of the types and kinds of occasions on which George felt the need to squeal shows this clearly. The squeal was obviously George Webber's reaction to a sudden access of a sense of freedom from human confinement, moments when he became conscious of immutable time and infinite space, and felt free of chronological time and place. We recall, for example, the anguished feelings of both George Webber and Eugene Gant in moments of isolation in the city, in which they would beat their knuckles bloody against the walls of a room. Now Wolfe says of the squeal that "the cry had come, most fiercely and with the wildest joy when it was torn from the heart of darkness and the fields of sleep. In many a silent night, and *from the prison of a city room*, his spirit had swept out across the fields of sleep and he had heard the heartbeats of ten million men around him. . . ." (Italics mine.) Here is the direct statement that the exuberance of the squeal arises out of the sudden sense of relief from the mortal limits of place, and of feelings of fraternity.

Similarly, many of the occasions on which Wolfe says George Webber's squeal was induced are moments of escape from chronological time. He describes one such squeal, on

pages 630-33 of *The Web and the Rock*. George had fled to Europe to escape from Esther—and, as we shall see, himself—and he arrives in a French town, tired and jaded. But immediately he begins to feel better. He obtains a room in a small hotel, and stands in the darkness, drinking red wine and listening to the sounds of Boulogne. He smells the "sweet air of the summer earth," "the smell of the sea in a harbor." "The traveler feels that he has been here before. He stands for a moment longer drenching himself in the fixed and living eternity of the earth, drawing its mighty and potent fragrance into his lungs, a part of the destiny of all its people." Then he climbs into bed, and listens some more:

He is conscious of time, dark time, secret time, forever flowing like a river; he is conscious of the whole family of the earth, all men living seem friendly and familiar to him, and for a moment he seems to be the living heart of darkness, the eye that watches over sleeping towns.

At that moment, he hears the whistle of a French train, and then the rattle of wheels and the clatter of hooves in the street, and then the faraway howling of a dog, and finally footsteps in the street below his window. The sound of the footsteps grows closer, and he hears voices of two people, and a woman's laugh:

. . . at that moment, by the magic of time, a light burns on a moment of his weaving, a shutter is lifted in the dark, a lost moment lives again with all its magic and terrible intensity, and the traveler is a child again, and he hears at night, beneath the leafy rustle of mid-summer trees, the feet of the lovers passing by along the street of a little town in America when he was nine years old, and the song they sang was "Love Me and the World Is Mine."

Where?

In the town of Libya Hill in Old Catawba twenty years ago, it is about eleven o'clock at night, he hears the soft, cool rustle of the leaves; there has been the broken thrum and ecstasy of music at a dance across the dark, but now this sound has ceased, and the town grows still, save for the barking of a dog, as now; save that, as now, somewhere beside the river in the dark, he hears the thunder of railed wheels, the tolling of the bell, and the long, wailing whistle

of an American train at night, a lonely and wonderful sound, as it recedes into a valley in the South.

Now George remembers other sounds of the town of Libya Hill, and the smell of summer at night: ". . . and that was twenty years ago when the song they sang was 'The Good Old Summer Time.'"

Thus this scene, drawn from the deep, dark gulf of memory, burns for a moment in the traveler's brain before he sleeps, but whence it came or by what magic who can say? The laughter of a woman in the street of an old French town has made it live again, and with it lives somehow, over the lost image of the child, over the ruin, weariness, and decay of his flesh, all of the enormous wistfulness, the innocence of man's youth that can never die. The memory evokes an unspeakable emotion, an unutterable cry, a meaning that he cannot shape to words in the heart of the traveler, he hears again the sharp, thin whistle of the French train in the night, and a cry of joy, of pain, of twisted grief and ecstasy bursts from his lips in darkness, and he sleeps.

It is fairly obvious what brought about the squeal then. George Webber has transcended time for the moment; he has recaptured the past. The scene in the Boulogne hotel room is one more example of those moments of stasis which appear continually throughout Wolfe's novels, and particularly in passages dealing with childhood, during which George Webber and Eugene Gant catch visions of a panorama of life going on all about them in a single instant. Instead of time, and the chronological perception of one event following another, there is the sense of lateral, spatial extension, and of seeing things in depth as in his childhood:

And finally, silence as before, the quiet street again, the rustling of young maple trees in the light wind, the brooding imminence of three o'clock, a few bright blood-flakes on the pavement, and all else the way that it had always been, and George Webber as before stretched out upon the grass beneath the tree there in his uncle's yard, chin cupped in hands, adrift on time's great dream, and thinking:

"Great God, this is the way things are, I see and know this is the way things are, I understand this is the way things are; and,

Great God! Great God! this being just the way things are, how strange, and plain, and savage, sweet and cruel, lovely, terrible, and mysterious, and how unmistakable and familiar all things are!"

Three o'clock! ³⁴

It is the loss of just such moments as these, in which George Webber could know that "Great God! this is the way things are, I see and know this is the way things are," that brings about the great explosion to Esther about having lost the squeal. The squeal was sign of transcendence over mortal time and physical space, and the achievement of a moment in which George could, through the full perception of the real world of sensory impression, attain the feeling of communion with time immutable. In the words of Marcel Proust, "a single minute released from the chronological order of time has recreated in us the human being similarly released in order that he may sense that minute. And one comprehends readily how such a one can be confident in his joy; . . . it is easy to understand that the word 'death' should have no meaning for him; situated outside the scope of time, what could he fear from the future?" ³⁵

But as George no less than Marcel grows older, such moments become rarer, because the nature of experience becomes more and more complex, and the once spontaneous and complete receptivity of the senses to the world of things as they are becomes increasingly conditioned by all the blurrings, pressures, and scars of accumulated existence. Until at last the widening schism between Body, who is the individual in mortal experience, and Man, the essential, spiritual self, becomes so great that to acknowledge the division and come to terms with it would seem a maddening but inexorable necessity.

Thus, after the anguished protest about the loss of the squeal, emblematic as that squeal was of the once more nearly perfect union of body and soul, of time and timelessness, the events in *The Web and the Rock* happen swiftly and abruptly. George goes to Europe, tearing himself away from Esther Jack. The episode in the Boulogne hotel is only momentary and George proceeds on to Paris and Germany, spending a period of wild dissipation. It culminates in a brawl at the *Oktoberfest*

in which George vents his rage on some bystanders and in return is so beaten that he is hospitalized with severe wounds of the head.

The fight was George's final protest against acceptance of the nature of mortality and imprisonment in time—acceptance, that is, of himself. It is followed by the dialogue between Man and Body which closes the novel, in which George finally accepts Body for what it is: mortal flesh. Man and Body both agree that the best time was childhood, when their union was closest. "That was a good time then," Man says.

"Yes," said Body. "But—you can't go home again."

Here is Wolfe's final theme. In addition to being the last sentence in *The Web and the Rock*, it is the title of the last novel. What it meant is crucial to the understanding of what Wolfe did and what he tried to do.

But before we consider the meaning of the phrase, it would be wise first to take a look at Wolfe's actual, physical homes, and the people who inhabited them. We had better examine Altamont, and Libya Hill, and the families in whose circles Eugene Gant and George Webber grew up.

The Town

TOM Wolfe's great poem," Wilbur M. Frohock has written, "rises out of our national neurosis, and his characteristic anxiety state is one that most of us have experienced in some measure. Much of America is still rural. Most Americans feel that they have rural origins. Yet our centers of education and culture, through which in the process of our growth we naturally pass, are as a rule urban in spirit and sensitive to the metropolitan influence."¹ Perhaps more than any other novelist of his time, Thomas Wolfe embodies this urban-rural schism in his books. His novels are faithfully autobiographical; he was extremely conscious of place and locale; and his life was spent mostly in Asheville, North Carolina, where he was born and reared, and New York City, where from 1923 until his death he lived more or less continuously, with the exception of occasional trips to Europe.

The scenes of *Look Homeward, Angel* are laid largely in Asheville, which he called Altamont, except for the chapters relating to his college years in Chapel Hill—Pulpit Hill in the novel—and the description of one summer spent in defense work during World War I in Virginia. The second novel, *Of Time and the River*, deals with Eugene in Cambridge, Massachusetts, New York City, and Europe, but several intervals describe him in Altamont again. In the third novel, *The Web and the Rock*, Wolfe went back to Asheville, this time called Libya Hill, to describe George Webber's childhood years, and then moved him to New York City. At the end of the book George goes to Europe again. New York City is also the scene of much of the final completed novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, though

George Webber makes several visits to Libya Hill, and spends some time in England and Germany. *The Hills Beyond*, the novel on which Wolfe was working at the time of his death, is laid entirely in North Carolina. Various short pieces in the collection entitled *From Death to Morning*, including the long novelette "The Web of Earth," have North Carolina for their locale, as do several of the stories in the volume *The Hills Beyond*, which contains ten stories and sketches in addition to the ten chapters of the uncompleted novel. Likewise, New York City is the scene of some of the short pieces in both collections.

When Wolfe left Asheville for Cambridge and Harvard in 1920, the population of Asheville was 28,504, which by New York standards would make it a small town. By North Carolina standards, Asheville was a city. By no means, however, was the Asheville of Wolfe's day a typical North Carolina city. In its mushroom growth—it doubled its population during Wolfe's first twenty years—and its frenzy for commercial expansion it is comparable to boom towns such as Roanoke, Virginia, rather than to the older North Carolina cities, as Agatha Boyd Adams has written.² The history of Asheville after the Civil War and through the first two decades of the twentieth century was one of turbulence. The Nashville Agarians assert that the South did not really begin to feel the impact of industrialism until after the First World War, but in Asheville "progress" had arrived some time previously. In the early pages of *The Web and the Rock* Thomas Wolfe describes how, as early as 1881 when George Webber's father came to Libya Hill, the feeling of imminent expansion was in the air. The senior Webber's arrival was a result of the construction of a new hotel, on which he was to supervise the brick masonry. At the time the railroad was being built into the city, "George Willetts, the great Northern millionaire," was building a huge country estate. "New people were coming to town all the time, new faces were being seen upon the streets. There was quite a general feeling in the air that great events were just around the corner, and that a bright destiny was in store for Libya Hill."

"It was the time," Wolfe continued, "when they were just hatching from the shell, when the place was changing from a little isolated mountain village, lost to the world, with its few thousand native population, to a briskly-moving modern town, with railway connections to all parts, and with a growing population of wealthy people who had heard about the beauties of the setting and were coming there to live."³ Long before most of the South, Asheville was exposed to the new ways. By 1876, the *Centennial Gazetteer of the United States* was noting that Asheville was "situated in the midst of magnificent mountain scenery," a sure sign that the tourist trade was already under way. It was during this period that Asheville became a leading resort, specializing both in summer visitors who came to escape the lowland heat and in year-round guests who came for reasons of health. In 1886 the Southern Railroad had laid its tracks through the mountains, so that Asheville was directly accessible to the North and the Midwest. George Vanderbilt—the "George Willetts" of Wolfe's description—built a huge chateau on a one hundred thousand acre wooden estate, which is now a museum. Soon afterward E. W. Grove, whose tasteless chill tonic had made him wealthy, came to Asheville. It was he who leveled off the mountain to build a tourist hotel, as described in *You Can't Go Home Again*.⁴ Quick to learn from the outlanders, the local residents launched a vigorous real-estate boom. By 1896 a guide book could remark that "Buncombe County and its superb capital, Asheville, have for years been the best advertised places in the state," and that Asheville's "fame as a health and pleasure resort extends over the continent."⁵

The first two decades of the twentieth century found the city and many of its leading citizens, including a number of Wolfe's relatives on his mother's side, deep in the throes of land speculation. In 1926, the year before the boom collapsed, Buncombe County, in which Asheville is situated, led the state in assessed real estate valuation.⁶ Many local citizens, like Wolfe's mother, were not content with mountain realty dealings; they journeyed down to Florida and invested heavily

there, too. When in 1927 the bubble burst, Asheville was hard hit. As Jonathan Daniels describes it, Asheville was "a town properly famed for the loveliness around it, and, also, a town fated to violence and pettiness, greed and frustration." Few other Southern cities suffered quite so acutely.⁷

What is important for present purposes, however, is not what Asheville actually was or what actually happened to it, but rather what Thomas Wolfe thought of it. Wolfe thought about it a great deal; he never really ceased to write about it. From his earliest letters to his mother written when a student at Harvard, on through his four novels, happenings in Asheville occupied his attention and demanded his commentary.

Wolfe left Asheville in 1920—the departure is described in the first pages of *Of Time and the River*—and his first letters home indicate enthusiasm for Harvard and his work there in Professor George Pierce Baker's "47" Workshop, and only a mild interest in Mrs. Wolfe's Asheville doings in the real-estate business. From the first he showed a zeal to distinguish himself in the eyes of the home folks, along with confidence that he would do so without any great difficulty. But as several years elapsed and Wolfe began to realize that it was not to be so easy as all that, we encounter a new tone in the letters to his mother. Commencing about 1923, he begins to show some anxiety over what Asheville and Asheville's citizens think of him. Living as he was largely off his mother's generosity, he resents the need to justify himself commercially, as he feels he must do, in the eyes of the family back home.

It is coincident with this development that there begins to appear in the letters the first criticism of Asheville and its ways. Once the criticism starts coming, however, it comes thick and fast. The letters written during the period 1923–27 are full of it. For the most part they are personal complaints, no doubt heavily influenced in their tone by what Norman Foerster has termed "the prevailing spirit of naturalism abroad in literary circles at the time."⁸ In lambasting Asheville for his mother, Wolfe follows the Sinclair Lewis line of reasoning: Asheville is so busy with business pursuits that it has no time for art and

beauty. There is much smiting of boobs, in the style of H. L. Mencken, as for example when he wrote his mother in 1923 that the plays he was going to write would not

be suited to the tender bellies of old maids, sweet young girls, or Baptist ministers but they will be true and honest and courageous, and the rest doesn't matter. . . . I have stepped on toes right and left—I spared Boston with its nigger-sentimentalists no more than the South, which I love, but which I am nevertheless pounding. I am not interested in writing what our pot-bellied members of the Rotary and Kiwanis call a “good show”—I want to know life and understand it and interpret it without fear or favor. . . .

I will step on toes, I will not hesitate to say what I think of those people who shout “Progress, Progress, Progress”—when what they mean is more Ford automobiles, more Rotary clubs, more Baptist Ladies Social unions. I will say that “Greater Asheville” does not necessarily mean “100,000 by 1930,” that we are not necessarily 4 times as civilized as our grandfathers because we go four times as fast in automobiles, because our buildings are four times as tall. What I shall try to get into their dusty, little pint-measure minds is that a full belly, a good automobile, paved streets, and so on, do not make them one whit better or finer,—that there is beauty in this world,—beauty even in this wilderness of ugliness and provincialism that is at present our country, beauty and spirit which will make us men instead of cheap Board of Trade Boosters, and blatant pamphleteers. . . .⁹

Asheville was unable to appreciate beauty—and young men who believed in it, that was the trouble: “If I really succeed, by the only standard that counts,—my own,—namely by writing a fine and noble play or book, worthy of my best, they would not understand what I had done, and would no doubt be a little bored by the result,—preferring *Parlor, Bedroom, and Bath*, or the poetry of Edgar A. Guest, or Dr. Frank Crane, and so on.”¹⁰

Wolfe was never a Nashville-type Agrarian; the Nashville group didn't like him too much and he didn't like them. The Agrarians at various times criticized Wolfe's work, and he replied in kind in *The Web and the Rock* (pp. 239-49).¹¹ But Wolfe was certainly as hostile as the Agrarians were to the New South of investment and factories and real-estate specula-

tion. Unlike the Nashville group, however, he was not often disposed to recognize any great decline in the New South from the old, pre-industrial South. He would not have agreed with Allen Tate that "the Southern man of letters cannot permit himself to look upon the old system from a purely social point of view, or from the economic view; to him it must seem better than the system that destroyed it, better, too, than any system with which the present planners, Marxian or any color, wish to replace the present order."¹² Wolfe thought almost entirely in terms of the artist, especially during the 1920's, and he hardly considered the rural South any more tolerant of or sympathetic toward true artists than the Kiwanians and Rotarians.

Wolfe's first writings, the one-act plays of Chapel Hill days and the one-acters and full-length dramas of the Harvard times, are mostly on Southern themes. He felt his provincial status acutely when he arrived at Cambridge, and much of his work was in terms of this. The self-conscious regionalism was one way, perhaps, of making his presence known. The best of the plays, the one entitled *Mannerhouse*, written in first draft in 1920 or 1921—surely not later—is constructed around the Old South-New South schism, and is rather crudely reminiscent of the Snopes-Sartoris conflict that William Faulkner was soon to develop so boldly. *Mannerhouse* is melodramatic, and without the successful irony and dramatic intensity of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels; but the conflict it portrays between the older aristocratic families and the rising middle class of non-slaveholders during the period following the Civil War has in it many of the elements that Faulkner would later use to such advantage.

Significantly Thomas Wolfe patterns "Porter, the poor-white capitalist," after one of his mother's brothers, William Harrison Westall, described by John Skally Terry as "a dealer in building material and real estate operator in Asheville, N.C., born 1863. At one time he paid the largest tax of any citizen in Asheville."¹³ This is most probably the same Will Pentland who comes to Eliza Gant's rescue when W. O. Gant stages a binge while Eugene is being born, and who immediately offers to give Eliza a good price on building materials if

she wants to set up separate headquarters from her husband.¹⁴ There is a scene in *Of Time and the River* in which Eugene Gant reads the play to friends, and Wolfe declares then that Porter's dialect "was the rich, plain, pungent, earthy, strongly colored speech of his mother, of his uncle William Pentland, and of the Pentland tribe."¹⁵

Mannerhouse provides a good example of the shift in Wolfe's feelings toward Asheville during the early 1920's. In a letter to his mother in 1920-21, Wolfe outlined the plot of the play. The hero, who was prophetically named Eugene, was a romantic young son of an aristocratic family, who followed his soldier father to the war in 1861, though himself remaining most cynical and sardonic about the causes of the war. Upon their return from the war in 1865, the father, who is still living in the past, is crushed to find that he must sell the ancestral estate to Porter, the poor-white neighbor. The father dies, Eugene goes away, and he returns some years later just as the mansion house is being torn down by the now quite prosperous Porter. Eugene then finds his boyhood sweetheart still intact, and together they go out to begin life anew:

On a little plot of ground with their lost kingdoms ever before them to remind them and strengthen them in their desire to produce, these two people, glorious forerunners of the New South, will settle down. Arm in arm they go out the door. At the door the sound of a plank being ripped away upstairs brings 'Gene back with a groan. "Take one last look at this room, 'Gene," she tells him; "and realize that this is past, that this is a fine life but a useless one. We are not living in the Memory of past greatness, but Now and Here. Are you ready to meet it?" Thus, they go out together, these two fine people, and as they go down the path one may hear the sound of hammering in other parts of the house. A castle is being torn from it's [sic] foundation, a mansion of the past is falling before the inexorable call of Tomorrow. From the distance comes the deadly whirring buzz of the New and the Curtain Falls!¹⁶

That was *Mannerhouse* as Wolfe described it to his mother in 1920 or 1921 (the exact date of the letter is not known). The version of *Mannerhouse* published in 1948, however, and dat-

ing probably from 1924,¹⁷ has an entirely different kind of conclusion, and in the difference lies the measure of Wolfe's changing attitude toward the South. In the published version of *Mannerhouse* the young couple do not walk off arm in arm, "glorious forerunners of the New South." Instead, Eugene comes back to the house, becomes enraged when the new owner gleefully smashes part of it away, and pulls down a pillar holding up the roof. He shouts for the family's old Negro servant, who leaps into the room, and crushes the new owner to death in his arms. The house thereupon caves in, killing them all. The call of Tomorrow may still be "inexorable," but somewhere between the two versions of that play the author's attitude toward its desirability has obviously undergone considerable change.

In the earlier version described to Wolfe's mother in the *Letters*, there is no reason to suppose that Porter, the poor white, is of a particularly villainous nature. In the revision, however, Porter assumes the characteristics of one of William Faulkner's Snopeses:

GENERAL

Give me the pen, Eugene.

A Pause.

PORTER

Funny, mebbe, 'bout all this, But hit's got to be. Hit's Progress!

GENERAL

Waving a transparent hand gently

And now the man has learned another word. It is, of course, a very fine word. Not only the world gets better, but all the people in it. In its essence it is the cult of pity for one's grandfather.¹⁸

Again, after the transaction for the sale of the house has been concluded:

PORTER

Yore money will be in the bank tomorrow, Mister Ramsay.

GENERAL

Why, that is splendid, Porter.

PORTER

Flensing his hand

I ain't so fine as some folks, mebbe, but I pay up prompt!

GENERAL

Porter, you have all the successful virtues and none of the gentlemanly ones. You were small today; you will be great tomorrow.

PORTER

Grinning

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

GENERAL

They always did—six feet of it.¹⁹

The new ending to *Mannerhouse* is something of a dramatic improvement, and was perhaps written in those terms, but it also indicates that the author is becoming critical of the business-minded South of the post-Civil War period and of his own day, and critical as well of his own family's role in it, which formerly he had accepted without question. We have seen that Porter, the "poor-white," is constructed from a model within his mother's family. In the early plot, Eugene, and Wolfe, are willing to accept Porter's kind of world. Evidently he was portrayed much more sympathetically. There was no remorse because the old mansion house was to be destroyed.

But in the revised version, Porter is made out as a grasping materialist; the hero, Eugene, can no more accept Porter's commercial approach than he can the old aristocratic ways; he can live in neither world and so he pulls the house down around him and dies. It may be doubted that the early version of the play contained the attack on "Progress"; from Wolfe's letters to his mother during the period of first composition we get no indications that he was concerned very much with the effects of "Progress" in the South. Not until 1923 does this subject begin to crop up in his letters home.

When it does, it comes not as criticism of commercial pursuits in themselves, but of the failure of Asheville to appreciate art and artists as well as money and banking. The Eugene of

Mannerhouse is unable to exist, sensitive soul that he was, in the world of materialism and profit making, and so Wolfe kills him off. The same theme—that Wolfe as a true artist is unappreciated by the crass commercial hearts back home, and that even his mother supports him because he is her son and not because he is a genius—is found in all his letters to his mother during that period. He denounces the wealthy, albeit a bit tentatively: "And it is because I respect my family so much, knowing you were as good as any, to see you bend a supple knee at any time to the Asheville Goulds and Astors. If any of them patronize me—telling you I am a 'bright boy'—for God's sake, don't look grateful or humble. Tell them I am pleased to hear of their interest and that I should be glad to give them a few moments of my time when they're in New York. This last is meant humorously—none the less seriously."²⁰ A postcard from England makes the same claim of misunderstood genius: "This is considered by critics as perhaps the finest parish church in England. In one corner of the church yard is a monument to Thomas Chatterton, a great poet and a great genius, who could make no way in the world and killed himself at the age of 17."²¹ Several times in *Look Homeward, Angel*, too, Eugene Gant sets up a romantic identification with Thomas Chatterton.

The attitude toward Altamont of Eugene Gant, in *Look Homeward, Angel*, is much the same as that reflected in the letters of the 1920's. Eugene Gant is the artist growing up among the insensitive townsfolk, including his mother's family, who are too busy hoarding, sleeping, and feeding to recognize or understand his genius. His father had come among these same townsfolk and succumbed, selling his prized stone angel to adorn the grave of a whorehouse resident. Eugene will not do this; he will go forth instead to the shining city of light and culture, where his true brilliance will be recognized.

In the course of the novel a great deal of sarcasm is aimed at the commercial mind. Wolfe's concern with it, however, is not so much because he thinks that land speculators and money grubbers are evil, but because businessmen are insensitive to

the merits of beauty and artists. Even Ben Gant, the Wolfean symbol of wasted youth in an alien and loveless world, does not suffer because of the commercial mores of Asheville. Rather it is the *personal* stinginess of Eliza and W. O. Gant that sends Ben out at a too-early age to earn a living. In his tirades, Ben blames not the community's economic philosophy, but that of his parents. "The value of a dollar! By God, I know the value of a dollar better than you do," Ben tells Eliza. "I've had a little something out of mine, at any rate. What have you had out of yours? I'd like to know that. What the hell's good has it ever been to any one? Will you tell me that?"²² If Ben is the victim of materialism, it is his parents' personal materialism. It is not the town that makes them that way. Eugene, of course, will escape. He will leave Altamont, and the family. But at this time Wolfe never seemed to draw a connection between Eliza Gant's ways and larger happenings in the community.

Look Homeward, Angel was published in October of 1929. Its arrival coincided with the stock market collapse. Both events made tremendous impressions on Asheville, already hard hit by the collapse of the real estate boom in 1927, and on Thomas Wolfe. "His own book," writes Jonathan Daniels, "written with the same eager fury which his mother gave to real estate, hit the town almost like the collapse of the real estate boom and left people almost as naked. And it made nobody so hurt and naked as himself—in loneliness under anger—even if the book also clothed him, at last, with the appreciation he so much wanted and which his work so deserved."²³ An Asheville newspaperman has recently described the impact of the book on the town in 1929:

The newspapers broke the news that Sunday morning to a city whose people had gone through the real estate boom-and-bust cycle of the middle 1920's, but were yet to travel the valley of stern personal and civic discipline imposed by bank failures and the great depression. It was a much more neighborly town than it is today and the people were proud, sensitive, and independent.

The reaction was natural—as natural as sunshine and rain, a fact not clearly understood by people elsewhere. It followed the pat-

tern of people everywhere when they consider themselves affronted or are placed on the defensive.

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The reaction of the community was not organized. It was simply the sum of its many parts, the personal viewpoints of the citizens. Depending on the individual, they expressed hurt, shock, anger, irritation, resentment, indignation, or disgust. They felt the mores of the community had been violated; that Tom had been disloyal to his own family, to his friends, and to his native city. His characters and incidents, they said, had been too thinly disguised.

Some were loud in their expressions of opinions, others whispered, some laughed. It is possible, also, that some were disappointed when they could not identify themselves as characters in the book.²⁴

In *The Story of a Novel*, Wolfe himself describes Asheville's reaction to *Look Homeward, Angel*:

For months the town seethed with a fury of resentment which I had not believed possible. The book was denounced from the pulpit by the ministers of the leading churches. Men collected on street corners to denounce it. For weeks the women's clubs, bridge parties, teas, receptions, book clubs, the whole complex fabric of a small town's social life was absorbed by an outraged clamor. I received anonymous letters full of vilification and abuse, one which threatened to kill me if I came back home, others which were merely obscene. One venerable old lady, whom I had known all my life, wrote me that although she had never believed in lynch law, she would do nothing to prevent a mob from dragging my "big overgroan karkus" across the public square. She informed me further, that my mother had taken to her bed "as white as a ghost" and would "never rise from it again."²⁵

Asheville soon became too pre-occupied with the devastating effects of the depression to worry much about Thomas Wolfe, however. As George W. McCoy remarks, "the people of Asheville turned their major attention to the struggle for economic survival after banks failed and the depression came."²⁶ Jonathan Daniels also describes the crash in Asheville quite vigorously:

The mayor was run out of office by clamoring citizens, a good many of whom had participated in the mess which made the mayor's perhaps corrupt use of city funds to save the bank seem necessary. The bank president, who was the town's first citizen in politics and finance, went down to Raleigh to become a convict. Six months after the bank failed, the ex-mayor went to the men's room on the floor above his law office and with a 45-caliber revolver—and approximately as Tom has described it in *You Can't Go Home Again*—blew half his head and brains all over the room. Also, as Tom wrote, a blind man found the body when he went in the room and stumbled against something on his way to the urinal.²⁷

If Asheville soon became too busy to concern itself overly much with Wolfe, the converse was by no means true. The reception accorded *Look Homeward, Angel* by his home town came with considerable impact for Wolfe. Formerly he had felt himself separated from the city because he was an Artist, and Asheville's grubbing minds could not recognize true art. He had gone forth into exile as Stephen Dedalus did, to live in silence, exile, and cunning while for the millionth time (though the first time in just this way, of course) he would forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race. Now, however, instead of himself having imposed the artistic exile, he was declared by the townsfolk to be morally and socially undesirable, a traitor to all who loved him and whom he loved. Asheville's citizenry had in effect told him that he was henceforth no son of theirs, and that he was to go and never darken their door again—something quite different from any self-assumed artistic isolation for someone like Wolfe, to whom the oft-denounced ties of home and the past were nevertheless so important.

The truth is that Wolfe had never for a moment given up the idea that his home town would recognize him as the genius he knew he was. His book was in this respect designed to show the folks back home what he could do. It was Wolfe's *apologia pro vita sua*, and his claim to importance in the eyes of Asheville. In *You Can't Go Home Again* Wolfe describes George Webber's visit to Libya Hill just before publication of his first novel, "Home to Our Mountains," a visit quite similar

to one that Wolfe himself made to Asheville while *Look Homeward, Angel* was on the presses: "He had the feeling, therefore, that in the eyes of his own people he had 'arrived.' He was no longer a queer young fellow who had consumed his substance in the deluded hope that he was—oh, loaded word!—'a writer.' He *was* a writer. He was not only a writer, but a writer who was about to be published, and by the ancient and honorable James Rodney & Co." ²⁸

Thus the hostile reception accorded his masterwork by his home town profoundly disappointed Wolfe. Instead of being hailed as the poet and genius of the mountain country, he was reviled as a traitor to it. Coincident with this came the impact of the depression, and these events stirred Wolfe, too. The entire brilliant façade of "Progress" and Greater Asheville came tumbling down. There were numerous suicides and other tragedies. His own family was involved; his sister Mabel and her husband Ralph Wheaton lost almost all that they had, and were forced to move from Asheville. Meanwhile—as will be seen in the chapter which follows—the devastating results of the depression on New York City, with the widespread human misery involved, also had its effect on Wolfe's sensibilities.

It began to seem to Thomas Wolfe that what had been wrong with Asheville—and with America—was not merely the negative sin of worship of Mammon. It was "Progress, Progress, Progress" that had brought on the misery and desolation of the depression. The insensitivity of Altamont, which in *Look Homeward, Angel* was merely regrettable, begins to be a positive evil in *Of Time and the River*. There is the scene in the Pullman lounge as the prosperous Asheville tycoons discuss the political campaign and the conditions of economic prosperity. Wolfe here is looking at 1920 with the hindsight of twelve years:

"And within another ten years we'll go to seventy-five, perhaps a hundred. . . . Why, that town hasn't begun to grow yet!" he said, bending his short body forward in his enthusiasm and tapping his fat knee—"It has been less than eight years since we established the Citizen's Bank and Trust Company with a capital of \$25,000

and capital stock of \$100 a share. . . . Now," he paused a moment, and looked around him, his swarthy face packed with strong conviction—"now, we have a capital of \$2,000,000—deposits totaling more than \$18,000,000—and as for the stock—" for a moment the little man's swarthy face was touched with a faint complacent smile, he said smugly, "I don't know exactly how much stock you gentlemen may hold among you, but if any of you wants to sell what he has, I will pay you \$1000 a share—here and now," he slapped a fat small hand down upon a fat small knee—"here and now! for every share you own."

And he looked at them steadily for a moment with an air of challenge.

"Not for mine!" the florid heavy man cried heartily. "No sir! I've only got ten shares, Emmet, but you can't buy it from me at any price! I won't sell!"

And the swarthy little man, pleased by his answer, smiled complacently about him before he spoke again.²⁹

The travelers discuss the election; they are for Cox but they will not grieve should Warren G. Harding win: "We'll have to give the Republicans credit for a good deed this time—they couldn't have made a wiser or a better decision." But the newspaper editor interrupts to say that they are all hypocrites, and that he is one himself: "we're tired of Woodrow's flowery speeches, an' we're tired of hearin' about wars an' ideals an' democracy an' how fine and noble we all are an' 'Mister won't you please subscribe.' We're tired of hearin' bunk that doesn't pay an' we want to hear some bunk that does—an' we're goin' to vote for the crook that gives it to us.'" ³⁰

Thus Wolfe depicts the wilfully blind and greedy men of Altamont, whose rapacity becomes the more culpable because it is accompanied by a crass hypocrisy. The businessmen, Wolfe is saying, are willingly and eagerly sowing dragon's teeth. No longer does Wolfe see their materialism as merely regrettable, as something which he can escape by leaving for the shining city; it has become something evil in itself, cruel to all men including the deceived materialists themselves as well as to a stray artist or so.

The lapse of several depression years between publication of *Look Homeward, Angel* and the writing of *Of Time and*

the River sharply changed Thomas Wolfe's attitude toward Greater Asheville. Here Wolfe's attitudes seemed to parallel those of a group of young Southern writers of the 1920's, the Fugitive poets of Nashville, Tennessee. During the first years after World War I, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren seemed to approach the postwar business South primarily through the eyes of the artist, and to think in terms of withdrawal and escape from the more crass, mechanistic features of "Progress" in the South. But during the late 1920's their attitude significantly changed, and it culminated in the symposium entitled *I'll Take My Stand*, in which twelve Southerners come out boldly for a return to an agrarian society and a halt to continued industrialization and commercialization of the South. Wolfe, too, reflected that change in attitude, though it took the depression and the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel* to make the change possible in him.

In *You Can't Go Home Again*, Asheville, which has been Altamont, becomes Libya Hill, and all its sins come home to roost. The theme of the novel is the collapse of "progress" in Libya Hill and the metropolis, and the author's rejection of artistic isolation. George Webber journeys back from New York City for his Aunt Maw's funeral, and observes all the signs of madness. On the train he encounters his boyhood chum, Nebraska Crane, now a big-league baseball player. Local businessmen in the Pullman car tell George and Bras all about the wonders of real estate and of the promise of Libya Hill's boom, and they attempt to persuade Bras Crane to invest some of his money in property speculation. But Bras refuses point blank. He is an agrarian, Wolfe says: "the only one who still conceived of the land as a place on which to live, and of living on the land as a way of life." "I already got me a farm out in Zebulon," he tells them. "It's paid fer, too! When I git through playin' baseball, I'm comin' back and settle down out there an' farm it. It's three hundred acres of the purtiest bottom land you ever seen. That's all I want. I couldn't use no more." ³¹

Other Asheville residents, however, were not so wise:

They had squandered fabulous sums in meaningless streets and bridges. They had torn down ancient buildings and erected new ones large enough to take care of a city of half a million people. They had leveled hills and bored through mountains, making magnificent tunnels paved with double roadways and glittering with shining tiles—tunnels which leaped out on the other side into Arcadian wilderness. They had flung away the earnings of a lifetime, and mortgaged those of a generation to come. They had ruined their city, and in doing so had ruined themselves, their children, and their children's children.³²

The town has passed from their possession; Northern bonding companies hold a huge mortgage on it. They no longer own the streets on which they walk. They have surrendered up capital and souls to the gospel of silver marks, and now they would pay for it. Symbolic of the tragedy of Asheville is that of Randy Shepperton, Wolfe's boyhood friend. Randy has had a job as a salesman with the Federal Weight, Scales, and Computing Company.³³ On George's visit home for the funeral he stays with the Sheppertons, and overhears Randy receive a vicious dressing down from the district agent. The chapter is a devastating satire on modern business methods and super salesmanship. When the depression comes, Randy is swiftly discharged from employment, and after several years of hopeless attempts to get another job, he goes on relief. Randy's tragedy, Wolfe says,

was the essential tragedy of America. America—the magnificent, unrivaled, unequaled, unbeatable, unshrinkable, supercolossal, 99-and-44-one-hundredths-per-cent-pure, schoolgirl-complexion, covers-the-earth, I'd-walk-a-mile-for-it, four-out-of-five-have-it, his-master's-voice, ask-the-man-who-owns-one, blueplate-special home of advertising, salesmanship, and special pleading in all its many catching and beguiling forms.³⁴

America, says George Webber,

went off the track somewhere—back around the time of the Civil War, or pretty soon afterwards. Instead of going ahead and developing along the line in which the country started out, it got shunted off in another direction—and now we look around and see we've gone places we didn't mean to go. Suddenly we realize that America

has turned into something ugly—and vicious—and corroded at the heart of its power with easy wealth and graft and special privilege.³⁵

Even more depressing, George declares, was the intellectual dishonesty; people in Libya Hill and elsewhere in America were afraid to think straight, to face themselves.

Thus Thomas Wolfe's original vague annoyance with the commercial ways of Asheville has been transformed into an active hostility, and in *You Can't Go Home Again* the resentment takes on the proportions of a full-fledged tirade. He must denounce the materialism of Libya Hill. The bitter hostility with which *Look Homeward, Angel* was received at home, the spectacle of old friends and family submerged in the debacle of the crash, must have made Wolfe realize, once his initial resentment had cooled off, that he was still deeply involved in his home town's life and ways, and that he cared a great deal about the lives and fortunes of Asheville and Ashevilleans. No longer could he fool himself into believing that he was an artist, and as such a thing apart from his origins. He *did* care what Asheville thought.

Along with this came a growing conviction about the true nature of the economic crash, and of its causes. It had been the result, he felt, of a frustration, of a great emptiness in the lives of his fellow citizens:

. . . under all this flash and play of great endeavor, the paucity of their designs and the starved meagerness of their lives were already apparent. The better life which they talked about resolved itself into a few sterile and baffled gestures. All they really did for themselves was to build uglier and more expensive homes, and buy new cars, and join a country club. And they did all this with a frenzied haste, because—it seemed to George—they were looking for food to feed their hunger and had not found it.

As he stood upon the hill and looked out on the scene that spread out below him in the gathering darkness . . . he remembered the barren nighttime streets of the town he had known so well in his boyhood. Their dreary and unpeopled desolation had burned its acid print upon his memory. Bare and deserted by ten o'clock at night, those streets had been an aching monotony, a weariness of hard lights and empty pavements, a frozen torpor

broken only by the footfalls of some prowler—some desperate, famished, lonely man who hoped past hope and past belief for some haven of comfort, warmth, and love there in the wilderness, for the sudden opening of a magic door into some secret, rich, and more abundant life. There had been many such, but they had never found what they were searching for. They had been dying in the darkness—without a goal, a certain purpose, or a door.³⁶

Emptiness had been the cause of the crash, he felt, because emptiness was what had driven the people of Libya Hill into a wild orgy of land-grabbing, speculation, false excitement, anything to break the numbing tedium of the monotonous day-by-day existence: "it was there and nowhere else that all this madness had been brewed." The adventure in real estate had represented for Asheville what the escape to the shining city had meant for him: a way out of the wilderness. He had said as much earlier, but at the time he meant the observation as an appeal for mercy for himself rather than as the expression of a deeper understanding of the plight of his fellow townsmen. Now, however, Wolfe felt free of any compulsion to have to justify his way of life to the businessmen of Asheville; their ways had proved to be the false ones. And with the disappearance of resentment, and the impact of *Look Homeward, Angel* which made him realize how much the good will of his home town did mean to him, Wolfe began to feel a greater compassion for his home. More and more he began to realize that he could not put Asheville behind him, that he was a part of it no matter whether he lived in Paris or Brooklyn or at home.

The change in his attitude is sharply outlined in two letters, both written to his former school teacher, Mrs. J. M. Roberts, the Margaret Leonard of *Look Homeward, Angel*. In 1927 he wrote her from Paris that

I wish I could tell you more of my book. . . . I think I shall call it *Alone, Alone*, for the idea that broods over it, and in it, and behind it is that we are all strangers upon the earth we walk on—that naked and alone do we come into life, and alone, a stranger, each to each, we live upon it.³⁷

Whereas in 1938, not long before he died, Thomas Wolfe wrote from New York to Mrs. Roberts with this analysis of what had happened:

. . . looking back over my childhood and early youth in Asheville, it often seems to me now that the people who went down, who became these shipwrecks, were not the worthless litter of humanity, but often the best, the brightest, and the most intelligent we had.

It occurred to me that if such things happen to such people there must be something wrong with the background that produced them, something in the life around them that did not give them enough to employ their talents or waken the deepest interest in their lives. Am I wrong about this? I want to keep a clear perspective, and I think the answer may be that my own life in so many special and intimate ways is bound up with the life of Asheville: I know so many people there, in a sense, when I go home, I inherit the life of the whole community.³⁸

The attitudes in those two letters, written ten years apart, are poles distant. In the first letter Wolfe is the romantic exile, living apart from the ordinary race of mortals, brooding in a splendid solitude, heaving dramatic sighs. The second letter shows him as a sober young man, trying to puzzle out the whys and wherefores of life for himself and his fellow men. The writer of the first letter would have abhorred the claim to kinship that the writer of the second letter set forth so confidently. We remember, too, that Wolfe's last, uncompleted novel, *The Hills Beyond*, was to have been about his mother's people, the Joyners of the Carolina mountains, following two novels given over almost entirely to the years of his sojourn in the shining city.

The City

WAITING at the railroad station in Altamont for the train that will transport him to graduate studies at Harvard, Eugene Gant knew, at the outset of *Of Time and the River*,

that he was waiting for the train, and that the great life of the north, the road to freedom, solitude and the enchanted promise of the golden cities was now before him. Like a dream made real, a magic come to life, he knew then that in another hour he would be speeding world-ward, life-ward, North-ward out of the enchanted, time-far hills, out of the dark heart and mournful mystery of the South forever.¹

So begins one of the major themes of Thomas Wolfe's work, the romance with the metropolis. In the three novels that followed *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe described through his two autobiographical protagonists the successive stages of his life in the city, and in so doing portrayed the city at greater length and perhaps to greater effect than any other modern American prose writer.

In Wolfe's affair with the metropolis, there are five identifiable stages, or attitudes. The first involves his Dream of the Shining City, in which he is a child and youth in the mountain town and has visions of the far-away metropolis. Wolfe speaks of "the great vision of the city . . . burning in your heart in all its enchanted colors just as it did when you were twelve years old and thought about it."² In *The Web and the Rock* young George Webber catches "the golden vision of the city, itself more fertile, richer, more full of joy and bounty than the earth it rested on. . . . He heard, far off, the deep and

beelike murmur of its million-footed life, and all the mystery of the earth and time was in that sound. He saw its thousand streets peopled with a flashing, beautiful, infinitely varied life. . . . He saw the streets swarming with the figures of great men and glorious women, and he walked among them like a conqueror, winning fiercely and exultantly by his talent, courage and merit the greatest tributes that the city had to offer, the highest prize of power, wealth and fame, and the great emolument of love." ³

The theme here stated—that of the boy in the provinces who dreams of success and fulfillment in the far-off metropolis—is a frequent one in both American and European fiction. We recall, for example, Eugene Witla of Dreiser's *The "Genius"* lying in the hammock at home in the little town of Alexandria, looking at the Sunday Chicago newspaper and finding it "as he had always found, full of a subtle wonder, the wonder of the city, which drew him like a magnet. . . . All at once this magnet got him. It gripped his very soul, this wonder, this beauty, this life. 'I'm going to Chicago,' he thought, and got up." ⁴ Similarly, Julien Sorel of *The Red and the Black* "loathed his native place. Everything that he saw there froze his imagination. From his earliest boyhood he had had moments of exaltation. At such times he dreamed with rapture that one day he would be introduced to the beautiful ladies of Paris; he would manage to attract their attention by some brilliant action. Why should he not be loved by one of them, as Bonaparte, when still penniless, had been loved by the brilliant Madame de Beauharnais? For many years now, perhaps not an hour of Julien's life had passed without his reminding himself that Bonaparte, an obscure subaltern with no fortune, had made himself master of the world with his sword. This thought consoled him for his misfortunes which he deemed to be great, and enhanced his joy when joy came his way." ⁵

The universality of this province-and-city theme has been noted by many critics, including Mr. Lionel Trilling, who discusses it at some length in his essay on James' *The Princess Casamassima*. Mr. Trilling finds this type of novel as "the very

backbone" of the fiction of the Nineteenth Century. The defining hero, he says, "may be known as the Young Man from the Provinces. He need not come from the provinces in literal fact, his social class may constitute the province. But a provincial birth and rearing suggest the simplicity and the high hopes he begins with—he starts with a great demand upon life and a great wonder about his complexity and promise. He may be of good family but he must be poor. He is intelligent, or at least aware, but not at all shrewd in worldly affairs. He must have acquired a certain amount of education, should have learned something about life from books, although not the truth." ⁶

Mr. Trilling then proceeds to make a rather arbitrary distinction between this kind of novel and the novel of *The Sensitive Young Man*, which he says is something else entirely. Whether or not the distinction is just, it is obvious that Thomas Wolfe's two heroes, Eugene Gant and George Webber, fill both Mr. Trilling's specifications. Wolfe himself recognized the popularity of his theme, too. "There is no truer legend in the world," he remarks in *The Web and the Rock*, "than the one about the country boy, the provincial innocent, in his first contact with the city. . . . It has found inspired and glorious tongues in Tolstoy and in Goethe, in Balzac and in Dickens, in Fielding and Mark Twain. . . . And day after day the great cities of the world are being fed, enriched, and replenished ceaselessly with the life-blood of the nation, with all the passion, aspiration, eagerness, faith, and high imagining that youth can know, or that the tenement of life can hold." ⁷

Wolfe recognized, too, how particularly applicable the theme is to the young Southerner. He tells of George Webber's reactions every time his train crossed the Potomac into the District of Columbia from Virginia. "He ducked his head a little as if he was passing through a web. He knew that he was leaving South. His hands gripped hard upon the hinges of his knees, his muscles flexed, his teeth clamped tightly, and his jaws were hard. The train rolled over, he was North again." As Wolfe points out, "Every young man from the South has felt this precise and formal geography of the spirit, but few city

people are familiar with it." "Did it mean that they were steeling themselves for conflict? Did it mean that they were looking forward with an almost desperate apprehension to their encounter with the city? Yes, it meant all of this. It meant other things as well. It meant that they were also looking forward to that encounter with exultancy and hope, with fervor, passion, and high aspiration."⁸

Most of the Southern writers who were Wolfe's contemporaries seem to have followed the same course that he did. William Faulkner, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Stark Young (a little earlier, to be sure), Katherine Anne Porter, Erskine Caldwell, Eudora Welty—all of them "went North" for a while, either to college or looking for work. Several of them stayed on; others stayed for a time and then drifted back; and a few, like Miss Welty and Mr. Faulkner, remained barely long enough to make sure that they didn't like it, and then came hurrying home. But the point is that almost all of them saw the need to make the try, perhaps because, as Allen Tate has written, "there is no city in the South where writers may gather, write, and live, and no Southern publisher to print their books, [so that] the Southern writer, of my generation at least, went to New York."⁹ The young Southerner interested in making a career out of literature, or for that matter any of the arts, inevitably saw New York as the citadel to be stormed. Just as Paris represented the supreme challenge to Stendhal's Julien Sorel and Flaubert's Frederick Moreau, so the young provincial Southerner conceived of the North. Faulkner expresses it well in *Intruder in the Dust*, when he has Gavin Stevens theorize to his young nephew Chick Mallison as follows:

For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun

yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and those circumstances which made more men than Garnett and Kemper and Armistead and Wilcox look grave yet it's going to begin, we all know that, we have come too far with too much at stake and that moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think *This time. Maybe this time* with all this much to lose and all this much to gain: Pennsylvania, Maryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble, the cast made two years ago. . . .¹⁰

Here Faulkner has appropriately tied in the challenge that the North, and indeed all worldly ambition, presents to the young Southern provincial with the South's historical past of hope and defeat, and he suggests that the young Southerner's historical inheritance provides a particular spur for his ambition. Almost ten years before Faulkner wrote that passage, Wolfe was saying just about the same thing. In *The Web and the Rock* he described the way that George Webber and various contemporaries from North Carolina felt upon making a trip northward to Richmond from the campus of Pine Rock College for the annual football game between the Pine Rock team and the college of Monroe and Madison in Virginia:

They felt in touch with wonder and with life, they felt in touch with magic and with history. They saw the state house and they heard the guns. They knew that Grant was pounding at the gates of Richmond. They knew that Lee was digging in some twenty miles away at Petersburg. They knew that Lincoln had come down from Washington and was waiting for the news at City Point. They knew that Jubal Early was swinging in his saddle at the suburbs of Washington. They felt, they knew, they had their living hands and hearts upon the living presence of these things, and upon a thousand other things as well. They knew that they were at the very gateways of the fabulous and unknown North, that great trains were here to do their bidding, that they could rocket in an hour or two into the citadels of gigantic cities. They felt the pulse of sleep, the heartbeats of the sleeping men, the drowsy somnolence and the silken stir of luxury and wealth of lovely women. They felt the power, the presence, and the immanence of all holy and enchanted things, of all joy, all loveliness, and all the beauty

and the wonder that the world could offer. They knew, somehow, they had their hands upon it. The triumph of some impending and glorious fulfillment, some impossible possession, some incredible achievement was thrillingly imminent.¹¹

Thus the North, and New York, was for Wolfe and many another young Southerner the symbol, so to speak, of a personal and historical challenge. But if most of the young Southern writers of the twentieth century felt this way, only Thomas Wolfe was writing the kind of autobiographical fiction that would describe it in detail. *The Web and the Rock* particularly is based upon this Southern romance with the city, though *Of Time and the River* also involves a great deal of it.

When we compare Wolfe's attitude toward the town with his notions about immutable time and infinite space, it becomes apparent that as Eugene Gant and George Webber dream of fleeing the Carolina mountains and the humdrum life there for the excitement and imaginative stimulus of the city, they are envisioning that flight as an escape from the confinements of chronological time and physical place. Once the Wolfean hero can gain the freedom of the city, he believes, he will then be rid of all that keeps him earthbound and inadequate. Just as Old Gant is the Far-Wanderer, so Eugene dreams of the city where he too may roam. The city will enable Eugene and George to fulfill themselves.

So as they leave for the metropolis, the young provincials plan, too, through the magic agency of art the conquest of time and space, the storming of heaven by frontal assault, and the transcendence of all that has been mediocre and unsatisfactory in their experience.

If the first stage of the process is the far-off wonderment of the provincial dreaming of the metropolis, however, the second stage is quite the opposite. The youth arrives at the city, and after the initial enjoyment of merely being there, he becomes quickly disillusioned. Thus George Webber's reaction, in *The Web and the Rock*, rapidly changes: "He had come to the city with a shout of triumph and of victory in his blood, and the belief that he would conquer it, be taller and more mighty than its greatest towers. But now he knew a loneliness unut-

terable. Alone, he tried to hold all the hunger and madness of the earth within the limits of a little room, and beat his fists against the walls, only to hurl his body savagely into the streets again, those terrible streets that had neither pause nor curve, nor any door that he could enter. . . ." ¹² It seems to be the impact of the mass that is most terrifying. What at first was the pleasant sensation of being left alone soon became the feeling of absolute isolation amid masses of other human beings. Thus Eugene Gant of *Of Time and the River* found that

the sense of drowning daily in the man-swarm returned to him. Each day there began anew one of the most ancient and fatal struggles that was ever waged—the struggle of man against the multitude: each day like a man who is going into battle, he would brace himself with savage resolution, and gird his spirit to the sticking point each time he went out in the streets, and each day, beaten, driven, trembling and inchoate, drowned in horror and oblivion, he would at length retreat into the four walls of his cell again, conscious only of having passed through a maelstrom of sound, movement, violence, and living tissue—of living tissue from which all of the radiant and succulent essences of individual character and memory had been extracted—and which flowed constantly back and forth along the beaten pavement in a lava-like tide of tallowy flesh, dark dead eyes, and grey felt hats. ¹³

The frustration and resentment are equally painful on the personal level. The young provincial has longed from afar for the company of artists and writers, for talk of literature and beauty, instead of the unfeeling, mundane company and conversation of the prosaic people at home. Now, however, he meets the urban dweller in the drawing room, at the theater, and is annoyed by the impersonality and aloofness. Thus George Webber waits uncomfortably for someone in the lobby of a theater: "The whole place seemed to prickle and to reek with the self-consciousness of these sophisticated people. They seemed to enjoy the excitement of this unwholesome self-consciousness, to get some kind of ugly thrill and pleasure from it, but it made him writhe, gave him a feeling of naked discomfort, of being observed and criticized by unfriendly eyes and mocking tongues, of feeling sullen, sick at heart, and for-

lorn.”¹⁴ How typical this sort of thing is can be seen by the similarity to passages in other novels describing the provincial in the city. Stendhal, for example, has Julien Sorel discover that

perhaps his perception was now a little clearer than at first, or else the first fascination produced by the urbanity of Paris had ceased. As soon as he stopped working, he fell into the clutches of a deadly boredom; this was the withering effect of the politeness, admirable in itself, but so measured, so perfectly graduated according to one's position, which is a mark of high society. A heart that is at all sensitive discerns the artificiality. No doubt, provincials may be accused of a trace of vulgarity, or of a want of politeness; but they do show a little warmth in answering one. Never, in the Hotel de la Mole, was Julien's self-esteem wounded; but often, at the end of the day, as he took his candlestick in the anteroom, he felt inclined to weep. . . . In Paris they are so considerate as to turn their backs to laugh at you, but you will always remain a stranger.¹⁵

So much for the second stage of abysmal discomfort. The third stage of the romance with the metropolis comes when the provincial begins to become accepted in society, and to feel more nearly at home in the strange environment. George Webber had dreamed of acquiring a wealthy mistress in the city. Shortly afterward along comes Esther Jack, and to a remarkable degree she fits the specifications in the dream. She is beautiful, rich, devoted, sympathetic, understanding; and she is mature, older than he is. And, as Wolfe points out, Esther symbolizes the metropolis successfully stormed, in more ways than one: “the woman had come to represent ‘the city’ to him. To him she was the city he had longed to know. Hers was not the city of the homeless wanderer, the city of the wretched, futile people living in the rooms of little cheap hotels, the city of the lost boy and the stranger looking at a million lights, the terrible, lonely, empty city of no doors, and the homeless, thronging ways. Hers was the city of the native, and now it seemed to him that he was ‘in.’”¹⁶ Again, “now, in Mrs. Jack, he beheld a natural and happy product of the environment that terrified him, and in her warm little stories he began to get a

picture of the city America had not known, but had imagined. It was a world of luxury, comfort, and easy money; of success, fame, and excitement; of theatres, books, artists, writers; of delicate food and wine, good restaurants, beautiful fabrics, and lovely women. It was a world of warm, generous, and urbane living; and it all seemed wonderful, happy, and inspired to him now." 17

The young Southern provincial now feels at home in the metropolis. No longer is he the gawking hick, looking in from the outside. He has friends, luxury. He is writing the novel that he is sure will make him famous. He has the love of a beautiful woman, and he knows the lineaments of gratified desire.

At this point in his life—and George Webber is more than ever speaking directly for Thomas Wolfe here—Wolfe does something typical of his Southern, provincial background. As we shall see in the chapter that follows, Wolfe placed great store, and displayed a continuing interest, in the stories of his mountain antecedents, his mother's Westall family history. Now, once he begins to feel that he "belongs" to the metropolis, he characteristically attempts to find roots there. He does this by endlessly questioning his friend about her family and childhood in New York. Wolfe devotes several chapters of *The Web and the Rock* to Esther Jack's happy memories of her childhood, as well as several additional sketches included in the short story collections. Mrs. Bernstein, in *The Journey Down*, describes the male character as he does just that, too. The various sketches in *The Web and the Rock* and in *The Hills Beyond* represent their author's attempts to set up the proper mythology and history needed for existence in a city for which the memories of Asheville and the mountain people would manifestly not do.

In a notable passage earlier in *The Web and the Rock*, Thomas Wolfe heaps considerable sarcasm on the talk of Southerners and their "roots." But in the Esther Jack sequence Wolfe once again, as he so often does, demonstrates in practice something that he will deny theoretically. In the same passage with the remarks about Southern "roots," for example, Wolfe

ridicules the idea, so often proposed by the Nashville Agrarian critics, that

the creator's life was menaced in the city with the sterile counterfeits of art—the poisonous ethers of “the literary life,” the poisonous intrigues of the literary cliques, the poisonous politics of log-rolling and back-scratching, critic-mongering and critic-pandering, the whole nasty, crawling, parasitical world of Scribble-onia.¹⁸

Yet that is just what George Webber and Eugene both alleged after their first contact with the metropolis, and as we shall shortly observe, that is what George Webber soon began alleging again, with even more vehemence than before. And here one recalls Donald Davidson's remark that Wolfe “had been taught to misunderstand with his head what he understood with his heart.”¹⁹

For the time, George Webber seems happy and contented with the metropolis. Gradually, however, disillusionment begins to set in. Having been accepted into metropolitan life, the provincial now finds it unsatisfactory even at its apparent best. Thus the fourth stage of the romance with the city, in which George Webber becomes increasingly dissatisfied with life in the metropolis, and with the woman who “had come to represent ‘the city’ to him,” Esther Jack. All of the old hatred of New York comes forward again, more bitterly than ever, and especially does Esther Jack seem representative of its horrors. If she was the symbol of the city at its best, likewise she comes to embody it at its worst for George:

He saw her at the center of a corrupt and infamous world, inhabited by rich, powerful, and cynical people—great, proud, and potent beak-nosed Jews, their smooth-skinned wives who made a fashion and a cult of books and plays and nigger carvings, the so-called leaders in the arts themselves, the painters, writers, poets, actors, critics, sly and crafty in their knowingness and in their hate and jealousy of each other—and in this picture of her world, the only thing, he thought, that gave joy to these dead, sterile and hateful lives in their conspiracy of death was the castration of the spirit of a living man.²⁰

Now this is a rather pathological performance, as are several of the chapters in *The Web and the Rock* describing this period. Much of the argument by those who accuse Wolfe of "anti-Semitism" is drawn from passages like these, and it is undeniable that the passages are representative of the way Wolfe's mind was working at the time. But it is not accurate, I think, to say that Wolfe was "anti-Semitic"; at this period he was primarily anti-New York City. He was having his novel rejected by a publisher, and was becoming jealous and resentful of the glittering success of his mistress as a theatrical designer. When he rants about Jews, it is always in terms of the literary coterie of the city: "the enervate rhapsodists of jazz, the comic strip, and primitive Apollos, Wastelanders, Humanists, Expressionists, Surrealists, Neo-primitives, and Literary Communists."²¹ Wolfe seems consciously to associate this idea with fears of emasculation; of George Webber he writes that, "like a man who has been overpowered by his enemies and had the organs of his virility torn from him, he still knew every furious desire, every soaring hope of creation and fulfillment that he ever had."²² Wolfe was in a period of hating and resenting the city, and his mistress who seemed to symbolize it for him, and since many of the literary people he met in New York were Jewish, he ranted against them.

It is the failure to understand what was going on inside Wolfe at the time that results in accusations of "anti-Semitism" such as this from *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, by Oscar Cargill and Thomas Clark Pollock:

His hardly conscious anti-Semitism is revealed not merely directly in his portraits of some of his students but indirectly in such things as his hatred and fear of New York, his unusual sense of loneliness there, and his desire to provide himself, in whatever fictional guise in his novels, with an indisputable Anglo-Saxon ancestry.²³

Here surely the cart is before the horse; if there is one theme that is constant throughout so much of Wolfe's work, it is his fear of the city, and everything about it, and his loneliness in it. It is because there were Jews in the city, and not because he naturally and primarily hated Jews as such, that Wolfe

wrote his so-called "anti-Semitic" passages. It seems to me that a memoir of Wolfe by a former student, A. Gerald Doyle, which is also contained in *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, is much closer to the truth:

There never was any indication that I found of Wolfe's infection with anti-Semitism. He might have been anti-night school students or anti-New York, but I can recall no instance of any overt anti-Semitism. It's significant that some of his passages in his novels might be construed as anti-Semitic by those who try too hard to find that ugly thing. But I believe he wasn't anti-Semitic any more than Dickens was when he wrote of the Jews as part of the scene in England. And it has been my experience that most of the people I know who are highest in praise of Wolfe are Jewish, which doesn't necessarily mean that he or they were conscious of any bent in this direction.

A large proportion of my class under Wolfe was composed of Jewish young men and women. I think that if there had been any evidence of bigotry it should have aroused at least fleeting comment. This I never heard. I think that Wolfe was far too great of stature to stoop to anti-Semitism. Others may have proof of it. You have not mentioned it without reason. But I didn't know of it then, and I don't know of it now.²⁴

It is not so much a mood of "anti-Semitism," then, as that of anti-New York, and anti-Esther Jack, that predominates in this fourth stage of the provincial's affair with the city. Tired of his mistress, envious of her success, conscious of his apparent failure, and acutely distraught of body and soul, he has once again rejected the golden city.

The final progression in Wolfe's metropolitan romance comes now. It too embodies rejection; but it is a rejection born not out of failure but of accomplishment. The novel, entitled "Home To Our Mountains," has been accepted and published. It is a critical and financial success. George Webber is now accepted as an artist. The provincial has in truth made good. He is famous.

The city has been conquered now, but in the victory George Webber and his creator have found that it is false. The story is told in *You Can't Go Home Again*. The final verdict is that

it is not for them. Here again, just as with Asheville, the impact of the great depression of 1929-34 seems to have been crucial.

Wolfe's final attitude toward the metropolis in the last novel is one of compassion; and of hatred, too. He hates the city itself, its customs, its values, the way it treats its inhabitants. But for the people who live there, he is sympathetic in the abstract, and he sees them as poor wretches being beaten by a machine. Page after page of *You Can't Go Home Again* is devoted to description of the ravages of the depression in the metropolis. He identifies the city with absolute negation and death.

George goes to a party in Esther Jack's fashionable apartment—he has resumed relations with her following the trip to Europe that closed *The Web and the Rock*, but on a much more limited scale—and all the hated esthetes are there. A man named Pinky Logan, probably a caricature of Alexander Calder, gives a performance with his miniature circus. Things go wrong; the performance disgusts the audience. Then a fire breaks out in the apartment house, and the guests are all evacuated. The only casualties are two elevator attendants. In extinguishing the fire, it is necessary to flood the underground railroad tunnels. For hours all train traffic into and out of the city ceases. Symbolically the glittering world of New York's wealthy dilettantes and socialites has been upset and shattered by the crash of 1929—for on that very night come rumors of a stock market slump.

Wolfe has destroyed the city and denied its ways; its symbol, Esther Jack, is hereafter absent from George Webber's life. George moves from Manhattan to Brooklyn, where he resides during the worst years of the depression, and observes all about him the pitiful effects of the business collapse on the city's poor. More and more he becomes bitterly conscious of the ugliness and emptiness and inhumanity that the city can represent, until at last in a chapter entitled "The Hollow Men," Wolfe identifies the metropolis with absolute negation and death. He describes the suicide of a man whom he calls C. Green, who jumps from the twelfth story of a Brooklyn hotel named the Admiral

Drake. Green's leap is depicted as the final act of a little man's rebellion against the rootless emptiness of metropolitan life; only in dying can C. Green reclaim his manhood:

There would have been a time and place for such a thing, brave Admiral Drake, if he, our fellow Green, had only fallen as a hollow man and landed drily, or if he had opened to disperse a grey embalming fluid in the gutter. It would have been all right if he had just been blown away like an old paper, or if he had been swept aside like remnants of familiar litter, and then subsumed into the Standard Concentrated stuff from which he came. But C. Green would not have it so. He exploded to drench our common substance of viscous grey with the bright indecency of blood, to resume himself from number, to become before our eyes a Man, and to identify a single spot of all our general Nothingness with the unique passion, the awful terror, and the dignity of death.²⁵

There is no doubt that at this period in his life Thomas Wolfe was trying his best to become "socially conscious," and partly succeeding. The depression had so disturbed him that for a time he dabbled with a kind of anti-capitalism, to the extent of remarking in *You Can't Go Home Again*, after a discussion of the collapse of American business, that "a better way of life, perhaps," would be possible in America, "but it would not be built on business as we know it."²⁶ This, however, is hardly Marxism, so much as a disgust for "Progress, Progress, Progress." Cargill and Pollock assert that Wolfe wanted to insert "radical or Marxian" ideas into *Of Time and the River*, but that his editor, Maxwell Perkins, kept him from doing so on the grounds that the Eugene of the book was representative of Wolfe during the 1920's, and that to make him radical or Marxist would be inappropriate.²⁷ Marxism, like any other kind of ism, is a particularly dangerous kind of label to apply to Wolfe, whose books and thoughts are so full of contradictions. Herbert Muller remarks that "Wolfe kept his head better than most of his contemporaries. . . . In particular, he was close to native traditions, which in the 'twenties and 'thirties were suspect among intellectuals on both the Right and the Left." In one sense this is hardly true; in succeeding chapters Wolfe veered from one extreme to the other. But what Dr.

Muller means is that in none of the Wolfe books is there a continuing and complete identification with any of the ideological schools of his time; founded so thoroughly on the individual consciousness as his work is, he could identify himself with no group, embrace no system of values and meanings. It is never a question of "either/or" with Thomas Wolfe; rather, it is "both/and." He is both scornful of Communists and sharply critical of American capitalism. He is both a believer in life on the land and the superiority of the Carolina mountaineer to the urban dweller, and bitter in his denunciation of Agrarians and Agrarianism. He is both critical of Jews in New York and possessed of a deep compassion for them—no one who could write the beautiful chapter about Esther Jack, entitled "Dark October," in *The Web and the Rock* could be accused at the last of bigotry or "anti-Semitism."

What is true is that, in his last book in particular, Wolfe displayed strong concern with social matters. As George Webber declares in his letter to Foxhall Edwards in *You Can't Go Home Again*,

Then came the cataclysm of 1929 and the terrible days that followed. The picture became clearer now—clear enough for all with eyes to see. Through those years I was living in the jungle depths of Brooklyn, and I saw as I had never seen before the true and terrifying visage of the disinherited of life. There came to me a vision of man's inhumanity to man, and as time went on it began to blot out the more personal and self-centered vision of the world which a young man always had. Then it was, I think that I began to learn humility. My intense and passionate concern for the interests and designs of my own life were coming to seem petty, trifling, and unworthy, and I was coming more and more to feel an intense and passionate concern for the interests and designs of my fellow men and of all humanity.²⁹

As we have seen in the previous chapter, this manifested itself not only in a conviction that the metropolis was ugly, sterile, and degrading to its inhabitants, but also in a closer identification with the people in his home town. Thus the fifth and final stage of Wolfe's romance with the city is accompanied by the resurgence of his feeling for Asheville and his mother's people.

It was in this period—in general, 1935–38, the last three years of Wolfe's life—that he visited Asheville for the first time since publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*. In the story "The Return of the Prodigal" (*The Hills Beyond*, pp. 108–41) he describes the visit. The story is divided into two sections, the first entitled "The Thing Imagined" and the second "The Real Thing." In the first, written in 1934 before the actual return, Wolfe describes a reverie of Eugene Gant in which he imagines himself secretly arriving in Altamont, a fugitive. His mother does not recognize him, and finally he despondently hears his brother Ben's voice saying, "Brother! Brother! . . . What did you come home for? . . . You know now that you can't go home again!" In the second section, "The Real Thing," Wolfe tells of Eugene Gant's triumphal return to Altamont, where he is honored, interviewed by the newspapers, besieged by well wishers, autograph hunters, and friends. George McCoy also describes the return, in similar terms.³⁰ During this period Wolfe also spoke of returning to Asheville to live. He spent the summer of 1937 writing and relaxing in a cabin near Asheville, and talked of returning to live in Yancey County.³¹ This, however, evidently did not work out too well; Wolfe found he enjoyed almost no privacy. Friends were constantly calling on him, and Wolfe, who was ever the hospitable host, felt obliged to entertain. Wolfe's last editor, Edward C. Aswell, declares that even though Wolfe dismissed any idea of returning to Asheville to live, he did plan to move from New York to the country. He remembers driving with Wolfe up the Hudson River into New York state so that Wolfe could look at several proposed sites. Instead, however, Wolfe went on a western trip during the summer of 1938, where he contracted the illness which was to prove fatal.

What is probably more important than this physical retreat from the metropolis, however, is the fact that Wolfe's last uncompleted novel, at which he was working until he took the western journey, was *The Hills Beyond*, the locale of which is once again the Carolina mountains. The artistic significance of this will be discussed in the final chapter of this book; for now it is enough to say that Wolfe's final rejection of the city seems

to have been both personal, social, and artistic. Whether it would have indeed been final is debatable, and not too important, since our interest in him is as a novelist, and our concern must rest with the novels themselves, not with what he might have done at some future date had he not died. If one cares to assume William Faulkner's own fatalistic view about Wolfe, however, one can contend that Wolfe had said all that he had to say when he concluded *You Can't Go Home Again*. "He may have had the best talent of us, he may have been 'the greatest American writer' if he had lived longer," Faulkner has declared, "though I have never held much with the 'mute inglorious Milton' theory; I believe it all gets said; that is, unless you are run down by a hit-and-run car, you say what you are capable of before you can persuade yourself to let go and die."³²

In all of Wolfe's various attitudes toward the metropolis, it will be noted that his feelings about it are always in inverse proportion to his feelings toward his home town. In the mid-1920's, when he was feeling most artistically alienated from Asheville, he was most enraptured by the city. During the depression he came to despise and condemn the metropolis, and to understand that Asheville, "progress" and all, was his home, and that he was for better or worse a part of it.

Some comparison of the way Wolfe speaks of the metropolis and of his home town is revealing. He describes the city as being dead, composed of hollow men, with vacant, sterile faces: "Must he then bow his head and hurry past below the stare of all the grey-faced ciphers in the street?"³³ The town, on the other hand, is green, alive. "And suddenly Eugene was back in space and color and in time, the weather of his youth was round him, he was home again." The literary coteries of the city are dead, along with their "niggling and overrefined aestheticism which was not only pallid and precious, but too detached from life to provide the substance and the inspiration for high creative work."³⁴ Whereas he came from the country, and when he wrote his books "the forgotten moments and unnumbered hours came back to me. . . . So did it all revive in the ceaseless pulsings of the giant ventricle, so did the plant go

back, stem by stem, root by root, and filament by filament, until it was complete and whole, compacted of the very earth that had produced it, and of which it was itself the last and living part." ³⁵

In the city, violence and evil as Wolfe sees them are vacant, impersonal, meaningless, as in the crowd milling around after a prize fight:

. . . those convulsed and snarling mouths, those feverish eyes shining there in the glare of night, evoked a sense of some sinister and yet completely meaningless passion. He listened to their words. He heard their epithets of hatred and of filth. He tried to find the meaning of it, and there was no meaning. . . .

Monk at last concluded that what they really hated was not so much the fight, the fighters, and the fight's result; it was themselves, one another, every living soul on earth. They hated for the sake of hate. They jeered, reviled, cursed one another because of the black poison in their souls. They could believe in nothing, and neither could they believe in themselves for not believing. . . .

Monk was to see it, feel it, know it later on in almost every facet of the city's life, this huge and baffling malady of man's brain, his spirit, and his energy.³⁶

In the country and town, on the other hand, evil is personal, immediate. The scene in "The Return of the Prodigal" in which Wolfe watches one mountaineer shoot another to death demonstrates this difference (Wolfe actually did witness such a killing, on the trip to Asheville in 1937). The killer is a man known to all the community, just as his victim is. His reasons for killing are common knowledge. His friends advise him to flee before the law comes: "Go on, now. They'll be lookin' for ye." The passion here is not meaningless; rather it is direct and primitive. Watching the killing, Eugene "heard the echoes of his mother's voice, saying: 'the wild life has all gone now.'" ³⁷ How much more vivid is the scene from "The Return of the Prodigal," and the other Altamont and Libya Hill death scenes as well, than are the ignorant death of unknowns in the metropolis. In the story "Death in the City," in *From Death to*

Morning, Wolfe describes the deaths of several nameless people of the city; and it is the very anonymity and casualness that most horrify the narrator.

Likewise, we can see the difference between Wolfe's city and his town in the personalities of the women who embody the characteristics of each, Esther Jack and Eliza Gant. Esther's voice is quick, lively, excitable; Eliza's is a droning drawl, reminiscent of her interminable tales of the hill country. Esther, the child of the city, is mercurial, fast-moving, transient. We think of her in terms of the flashing glitter of the theater, with its artificial reality—Wolfe speaks elsewhere of "the sterile old brothels of the stage." Indeed, part of the tragedy of Esther Jack as Wolfe sees it is that her talent and perseverance count for so little because of the larger impermanence and impersonality of the city that is her home and her way of life. Eliza, on the other hand, is slow-moving, patient. As we shall observe in the chapter that will follow, Eliza's ways seemed to symbolize for Wolfe those of nature, of the fruitful, growing earth. The city's child, then, is brilliant but transient, while the country woman is quiet but enduring.

"A man's best preparation for knowing a folk culture," John Miller Maclachlan has written about Wolfe and his description of the mountain people, "is to be born into it, to fail of its standards, to resent and hate them, and at last in torment to see through the facets of his torture the elemental humanity of the people."³⁸ This was precisely what Wolfe did. He left Asheville for "new lands and mornings and the shining city," glad to be free of the humdrum monotony of provincial life. But he found the city ultimately barren, and in his last novel he symbolically destroyed it. As Floyd C. Watkins writes, "in the end he was much closer to their [the Nashville Agrarians'] opinions than even he would admit, and closer than any of the Nashville critics have yet realized."³⁹

Whatever may be said of the metropolis, one thing is certain: if it was to have been the device, the means whereby the Wolfean hero would be able at last to overcome the conditions of mortality, the confinements of place and the losses of time, it failed as such. When Eugene and George left for the North,

it was in a mood of imminent triumph. By leaving the unromantic town for the shining city, they thought, they would be able to transcend their mortal limitations, and rise above all loss or waste. But what both of them found in the city was only another place, only more ebbing time. Yet, as we shall see, in coming finally to realize that the fabulous metropolis was no more conducive to such fulfillment than the town had been, or that Paris might be, or any other particular place, it began to occur to Thomas Wolfe that perhaps the quest was in fact impossible of fulfillment, and, still more important, that fulfillment on those terms was not what Eugene and George had really wanted at all.

Wolfe's best writing was almost always about the Town, not the metropolis. *Look Homeward, Angel*, the death of Old Gant in *Of Time and the River*, the long story "The Web of Earth" in *From Death to Morning*, the story "The Lost Boy" in *The Hills Beyond*, and portions of *The Hills Beyond* itself include most of Wolfe's good writing; they do indeed exist "in space and color and in time." On the other hand, Wolfe on the metropolis is so often formless, chaotic, and without depth, addicted to the kind of writing that R. B. Heilman rightly likens to "an orchestral wind sougning through the pines."⁴⁰

Yet in the last analysis there is no other American prose writer of our time who had done the job of depicting the metropolis that Wolfe has done. Most of our major novelists have not dealt with the city as such; and when they do, as in Dos Passos and Farrell, they approach the city with the outlook of the naturalistic novelist who perforce must view life in the metropolis as environmental, with man struggling vainly to extricate himself from a hostile physical universe.

Sinclair Lewis has said of Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* that "here is the city, smell of it, sound of it, harsh and stirring sight of it; . . . a thousand divinations of beauty without one slobber of arty Beauty-mongering."⁴¹ Yet Dos Passos' characters do not "experience" the city as such. The passages Lewis seems to be referring to come in italic type, as little preludes before each chapter, and not as part of the story itself. The characters

themselves do not feel the "harsh and stirring sight of it" very often; they are too busy being pushed around by the harshness. As in so much of Dos Passos, the prose preludes seem to be unreal, to exist in a kind of ironic counterpoint, as it were, to the ugly reality of trapped animals. On the other hand, Thomas Wolfe, despite occasional "arty Beauty-mongering," shows us people living with that city of "harsh and stirring sight."

Wolfe's city is less like Dos Passos' and Farrell's, and more like that of European writers like Stendhal and Flaubert. His New York is reminiscent most of all of Frederick Moreau's Paris in *The Sentimental Education*, and even of the "capital infame" of Charles Baudelaire. He comes to New York as Boswell did to London. The city is approached not merely as the scene of events, but as the event itself. Wolfe sees his city whole, with a personality and force of its own. The personality is negative, to be sure, and the force is mostly for evil, but the bodily presence of the city is always foremost in the consciousness of the two autobiographical protagonists of the novels as they go about their business. The urban dwellers of *You Can't Go Home Again* battle not against an environment, but a personality. When Wolfe comes to hate the metropolis, it is as evil in itself, and not merely as the place where some evil people dwell. Perhaps only provincials like Wolfe and Boswell and Flaubert could be so naïve as to invest a city with so much mystery and glamour in the first place. Yet see it whole Thomas Wolfe did, and though he distorted it and exaggerated it, still he has given it what is perhaps its fullest characterization in American fiction thus far.⁴²

The Mother and the Father

IF the town and the city are the "places" of Wolfe's novels, then his mother and father play an important role in giving character to these places. Of Eugene Gant, Thomas Wolfe writes that "the fusion of the two strong egotisms, Eliza's in-brooding and Gant's expanding outward, made of him a fanatical zealot in the religion of Chance."¹ It was Eliza and W. O. Gant who made him what he was, and Wolfe saw their coming together as a portentous happenstance. As he remarks in the very first paragraph of the novel, the destiny that brought them together to produce Eugene was "touched by that dark miracle of chance which makes new magic in a dusty world." The new magic, of course, was Eugene.

The choice of the word "fusion" to indicate how Eugene's parental heritage functioned is just a bit too optimistic, however. It bears connotations of a coalition. "Meeting place" would be the safer word. "Battleground" is only somewhat extravagant. Eliza and W. O. Gant were temperamental opposites, and they knew it. "For from the first," Wolfe writes, "deeper than love, deeper than hate, as deep as the unfleshed bones of life, an obscure and final warfare was being waged between them. Eliza wept or was silent to his curse, nagged briefly in retort to his rhetoric, gave like a punched pillow to his lunging drive—and slowly, implacably had her way."² By the time that Eugene Gant has been born, the antagonism between Eliza and W. O. Gant was a pronounced and powerful thing. During Eugene's childhood the rift deepened. When he was seven, the household split up into two camps under separate roofs. Old Gant lived in the house he had built on Woodson Street, with

his daughter Helen to keep house for him. Eliza moved over, taking Ben and Eugene along with her, to the tourist home she had purchased, "Dixieland." It was not a "separation" as we understand the term today. They were still man and wife, and the household simply operated in two houses rather than one. But the fact remains that from Eugene's seventh year on, the father and mother lived apart, and preferred to do so.

The characters of Eliza and W. O. Gant are drawn with close fidelity to their real life counterparts. Eliza is Julia Elizabeth Wolfe, nee Westall; and so, though much less vividly, is Aunt Maw of the Webber novels. That this is so is evident not only from a reading of Wolfe's *Letters to His Mother*, in which the personality of Julia Wolfe stands out almost as sharply as her son's, but from various transcriptions of Wolfe's mother's talk. Hayden Norwood, in his book *The Marble Man's Wife*, reproduces a great deal of Mrs. Wolfe's rambling reminiscences. Likewise John Skally Terry, in his introduction to the *Letters to His Mother*, has appended fourteen pages of Mrs. Wolfe's talk. In his letters, Wolfe and his mother always maintained the fiction that Eliza was not Julia, any more than Eugene was Thomas; but it is obvious that in writing to his mother on those terms, and probably vice versa, Wolfe realized that both of them were doing this because it made correspondence more comfortable. For example, soon after *Look Homeward, Angel* was published Mrs. Wolfe evidently had some doubts about Eliza, and conveyed them to her son. Wolfe wrote back that

I can only say here, in reference to one point in your letter, that it has never occurred to anyone with whom I have spoken here that Eliza was anything but a very strong, resourceful, and courageous woman, who showed great character and determination in her struggle against the odds of life. That is certainly the way I felt and feel about her, and since I wrote the book my opinion ought to be as good as any one's. Some of the most intelligent people in the country have read the book and think it is a fine thing, and that the leading characters are remarkable people—if this is true I do not think we should be greatly concerned with what spiteful and petty people in small towns think.³

Later, in 1932, Mrs. Wolfe visited her son in New York City, and Wolfe wrote the long and beautiful story entitled "The Web of Earth," included in the *From Death to Morning* collection; it is a monologue by Eliza Gant, who sits in her son's apartment in New York City and reminisces about her life. It is obviously Julia Wolfe talking, and Wolfe knew it and knew, too, that his mother and her friends would instantly recognize it.⁴ Therefore, he prepared her for its publication in *Scribner's Magazine*:

Perkins is enthusiastic about it. He says it is a great story, the true stuff of life, and one of the best things I ever did. If this is so, as I told you in my last letter [*missing from the collection*], I can thank you, because I have used many of the stories you have told me, together with others of my own: the story is told completely in the words of one person, a woman, who starts out to tell her son about a single incident and in the course of telling it brings in memories, stories, and recollections that cover a period of seventy years. In the telling the story weaves back and forth like a web and for that reason I have called it *The Web of Earth*. The story is about everything that goes to make up life—the happiness, the sorrow, the joy, the pain, the triumph and the suffering—but you need feel no alarm or nervousness: it is "on the side of the angels," it has been written to the glory of mankind, and not to their shame, it says that life, even with its grief and pain, is good, and that people, even with all their faults, mistakes, and errors, are all right. As for the person who tells the story, everything that is written is written as an honorable tribute to her courage, strength, and character. . . .

I have told you all this because I think the curiosity seekers and gossips may call you up and try to pump you as they have before, and because I want you to know that you have nothing to worry about. . . . I think you might say that, as you understand it, your son is interested in putting down a part of his picture of life as he sees it, and to do it as sincerely and honestly as he can—that the web of life—its web of fortune, misfortune, joy and grief, is the same everywhere, but that the writer, naturally, must use the material he has seen and knows in showing this. . . .⁵

The worried, anxious tone throughout this letter is no doubt due to Wolfe's all too vivid memories of the Asheville

reception of *Look Homeward, Angel*; he knew very well how close to "reality" the material in "The Web of Earth" was, and he wanted to make certain that his mother would read the new story in the proper frame of mind. No doubt he still remembered quite vividly the letter he later quoted in *The Story of a Novel*, from an old Asheville lady, who told him that his mother had taken to her bed "as white as a ghost" and would "never rise from it again."

The Westall family from which Julia Elizabeth Wolfe came was a numerous mountain clan, and to her son his mother seemed not only a very intense, unique individual in her own right, but the embodiment as well of the mountain family whence she sprang. In *Look Homeward, Angel* Wolfe describes the family, called the Pentlands in the Gant books and the Joyners in the Webber novels, as they gather for Ben Gant's funeral. Melancholy, superstitious, strongly vital and healthy, "smelling of the earth," the Pentlands convened at funerals and weddings in token of their unity, "more enduring than life, more strong than death." The very sight of them made Eugene Gant aware of his irrevocable ties with them: "Their lust, their weakness, their sensuality, their fanaticism, their strength, their rich taint, were rooted in the marrow of his bones." ⁶ In *The Web and the Rock* young George Webber, listening as Aunt Maw in her drawling voice endlessly droned the legends of the mountain people, envisioned the Joyners "toiling up a wooded hill in sad, hushed evening light, to vanish." George thinks of old wars and battles; the Joyners become prototypes of all mankind, "in a thousand little houses in the wilderness" where they perform the recurring vigils and rituals of birth and death, mourn the departed in all-night convocation before a pine fire, and hurl "their prodigal seed into the raw earth of a mountain woman's body, bringing to life a swarming progeny. . . ." Individual Joyners may die, but the tribe continues forever; "the triumphant Joyners, superior to all loss or waste, lived forever as a river lives. . . . Only the Joyners—these horror-hungry, time-devouring Joyners—lived, and would not die." ⁷

One doubts that the individual Westalls were any more

permanent or time-devouring than were members of other families, whether in Asheville or elsewhere, but the point is that evidently they seemed so to Thomas Wolfe. It is certainly true that there were a great many of them, not only in Asheville but all through the countryside; and as with most Southern families, the sense of belonging to a group was strong.

Throughout the descriptions of the Pentlands and Joyners, one encounters certain recurring images. There is the image of timelessness, of the tribe's continuance beyond the boundaries of life and death: "time-devouring Joyners," "more enduring than life, more strong than death," "the very death-watch of a voice, the voice of one who waits and watches, all-triumphant, while others die," "all men must die save only these triumphant censors of man's destiny, these never-dying, all-consuming, Joyner witnesses of sorrow, who lived, and lived forever." With this goes the image of the Pentlands and Joyners as products of the fertility of nature, of the agrarian existence close to earth, with the annual recurrence of seasonal rebirth: "smelling of the earth," "a race as lawless as the earth, as criminal as nature," "they bloomed or perished as things live or die in nature," "lived forever as a river lives," "his mother's ancestral earth," and of course the striking image of the Joyner males sowing seed into "the raw earth of a mountain woman's body."

When Wolfe describes Eliza Gant, it is often in terms like these. "Her spirit was as everlasting as the earth on which she walked," he says of her in *Of Time and the River*: ". . . she was triumphant over the ravages of time and accident, and would be triumphant to her death."⁸ From the same book is another such description:

The final impression of the woman might have been this:—that her life was somehow above and beyond a moral judgment, that no matter what the source or chronicle of her life may have been, no matter what crimes of error, avarice, ignorance, or thoughtlessness might be charged to her, no matter what suffering or evil consequences may have resulted to other people through any act of hers, her life was somehow beyond those accidents of time, training, and occasion, and the woman was as guiltless as a child, a river, an avalanche, or any force of nature whatsoever.⁹

Especially is she the symbol of fruitfulness. Penurious and tight-fisted she may have been, just as the earth is not overly lavish in the mountains; but her son nevertheless identified her with the earth-mother, timeless and persistently fertile. Wolfe's tribute to Julia Wolfe, as we have seen, is the story "The Web of Earth." Eliza Gant—in the first magazine version, published in 1932, she is Delia Hawke—tells her son a long (ninety-two page) tale about the prophetic nature of two numbers she heard one day: "says, 'Two . . . Two,' says, 'Twenty . . . Twenty.'" The story demonstrates Eliza Gant's (and Eugene's) affinity for the mystic, the ritualistic, and for the sense of continuity in the earth, with its recurrent seasons. This is apparent from the outset: ". . . In the year that the locusts came, something that happened in the year the locusts came, and all of the trees were eaten bare: so much has happened and it all seems so long ago. . . ." In telling of the numbers she heard aloud one day, Eliza also recapitulates her life, from before the Civil War until the birth of the twins, Grover and Ben. The prophetic nature of the numbers "two" and "twenty" is finally borne out by the birth of the twins, exactly twenty days after she heard the voices, but in the meantime she tells of her life from her birth in the Carolina mountains into a farm family, through her childhood, her marriage to Gant, and on into the present day. She tells about the counsel she gave a friend when the depression threatened to wipe him out: "I've got a secret that I'm goin' to tell you. I've still got a little patch of land out in the country that no one knows about and if the worst comes to the worst," I said, "I won't starve. I'll go out there and grow my food and I'll have plenty. And if you go broke you can come on out," I said. "You won't go hungry, I can make things grow." "We've got the earth," I said. "We've always got the earth. We'll stand upon it and it will save us. It's never gone back on nobody yet."¹⁰

The end of "The Web of Earth" is noticeably reminiscent of the conclusion of the Anna Livia Plurabelle sequence of *Finnegans Wake*, published separately in *transition* about the same time, in which James Joyce was describing the eternal

feminine principle, and likening Anna Livia to the earth goddess. Wolfe shows Eliza, finishing her tale, hearing the sound of ships in the harbor, and thinking of home in the mountains:

Lord, boy! What's that I hear now on the harbor? Hah? What say? A ship!—Now it will soon be April, and I must be going home again; out in my garden where I work, the early flowers and blossoms will be comin' out, the peach trees and the cherry trees, the dogwood and the laurel and the lilacs. I have an apple tree and it is full of all the birds there are in June: the flower-tree you planted as a child is blooming by the window where you planted it. (My dear child, eat good food and watch and guard your health: it worries me to think of you alone with strangers.) The hills are beautiful and soon it will be spring once more. (It worries me to think of you like this, alone and far away: child, child, come home again!)

O listen! . . .

Hah? What is it? . . .

Hah? What say? . . .

(Lord God! A race of wanderers!)

Child, child! . . . what is it?

Ships again! ¹¹

The final impression of "The Web of Earth" is that Eliza will go on, tending her garden, living her life, telling stories and thinking about them, until she dies, and that her death as well as her life will be as regular and as natural as the seasons. The story is Eliza's life, and it is also the story of seventy years of mountain life, in which Eliza who tells it all is triumphant over war, famine, marriage without real love, sickness, depression, and fear. At the end she will inevitably and invincibly return home and tend the garden some more.

The story also demonstrates Eliza's affinity for the mystical. The device of the numbers is not the only instance. She insists that Old Gant's alleged hatred of Chinamen is founded on something supernatural. When Ambrose Radiker, the saloon keeper, says that Old Gant has "got some grievance against Chinamen, at some time or other he's had trouble with them," Eliza replies as follows: "'No,' I said, 'you're wrong.' I looked

him straight in the eye. 'Not in *this* life,' I said. 'Why, what do you mean?' he says, and, let me tell you, he gave me a mighty queer look.

" 'I can't say no more,' I said, 'but there are things you don't understand,' I said. . . ." ¹²

Several times during the story she insists that Gant has evidently known and had difficulties with Chinamen in a previous life. And when Gant remarks that "I may have known them, as the saying goes, in some former life, some different reincarnation," Eliza agrees emphatically: "*Yes,*" I said, "that's what I think it was, you've hit the nail on the head, all right. That's exactly what it was, it never came out of *this* world. . . ." ¹³

Wolfe of course is using Eliza's insistence upon the supernatural for purposes of comedy; it is obvious that Eliza will not rest until she finds some symbolism for the "two" and "twenty" and when the first choice, the story of the two murderers, fails, she then waits serenely until the birth of the twins comes along to fulfill her triumphant clairvoyance. But though Wolfe joked at it, he was impressed by it, too, and the final paragraph, with its notions of wanderers and a fatal destiny that draws men from home to roam the earth, shows it. Undoubtedly Wolfe felt that it was Eliza who gave Eugene his sense of dark mystery: "He heard the ghostly ticking of his life; his powerful clairvoyance, the wild Scotch gift of Eliza, burned inward back across the phantom years, plucking out of the ghostly shadows a million gleams of light," he wrote in *Look Homeward, Angel*. ¹⁴

It is probable that Wolfe derived from his mother the faculty of "total recall" of an episode or scene, whether by psychological or physiological means. It is this ability to remember entire scenes, in all the particularities, and to associate one scene with another, that Herbert J. Muller calls Wolfe's "extraordinarily keen senses and retentive memory, which make possible the uncommon perceptions, the deep associations and the complex syntheses that are one way of defining genius." ¹⁵ As John Peale Bishop remarks, "Wolfe could no more than Eliza Gant suppress any detail, no matter how irrelevant; indeed, it was impossible for him to feel that any detail was irrelevant."

evant to his purpose." ¹⁶ The story "The Web of Earth" is an example of the quality of Mrs. Wolfe's memory; and of her son's as well, for he remembered her reminiscences so fully. John Skally Terry wrote that "those who have never heard Mrs. Wolfe talk cannot imagine how detailed and clear is her memory. She remembers things that happened forty or even sixty years ago better than most people can remember what happened to them last week. . . . Her son literally took her sagas and wove them into great epics." ¹⁷ Nor was Wolfe the only member of the family to inherit his mother's recollecting skill; there is on file in the folk archives of the Library of Congress a transcription by Wolfe's remarkable sister, Mabel Wolfe Wheaton, who tells of her memories of her brother's death. Originally scheduled to consist of fifteen minutes of talking, it occupies several hours of record space.

From his father, William Oliver Wolfe, Thomas Wolfe is generally supposed to have inherited his other most prominent literary talent, the taste for rhetorical use of language. "It takes W. O. to tie a knot in the tail of the English language," Asheville citizens boast. But the use of language for language's sake is by no means confined to the Wolfe side of the family tree. There were orators in Mrs. Wolfe's ancestry, too. Mrs. Wolfe's father, T. C. Westall, after whom Wolfe was named, was in his time a mighty wielder of words. In a letter to Zebulon Vance, Civil War governor of North Carolina, Westall spoke in 1864 of a political figure of his day, William W. Holden, as having "swallowed a potion of political poison for which there is no antidote, and already his pulse has the flutterings of death." ¹⁸ Bascom Pentland, of *Of Time and the River*, whose real life counterpart was Mrs. Wolfe's brother Henry Westall, was also renowned for his ability to manipulate the language. Bascom's partner marvels to Eugene Gant that "The Reverend knows words the average man ain't never heard. He knows words that ain't even in the dictionary. Yes, sir!—and uses 'em, too—all the time!" In *The Hills Beyond*, which deals with the history of the Joyner family in the Carolina mountains, there is much orating and love of orating. One of the most vivid characters is Zachariah Joyner, whose rhetorical skill was the joy of his

political constituents. While neither Zach Joyner nor any other of the characters in Wolfe's last uncompleted work seems to be drawn from life in the way that most of Wolfe's earlier characters are, Zach is evidently inspired in part by both T. C. Westall and Zebulon Vance.

In any event, it is a certainty that a love of high-sounding language is no rare thing in the South, and it seems likely that Wolfe's debt for his rhetorical talent is not entirely to his father.

Like Eliza Gant, W. O. Gant is drawn from life. William Oliver Wolfe was a stonemason. He came originally from the Pennsylvania Dutch country, of mixed German and English ancestry. Thomas Wolfe himself gives notice of his intentions toward his father in a letter to his mother while still at Harvard:

Mama, in the name of God, guard Papa's letters to me with your life. Get them all together and watch them like a hawk. I don't know why I saved them but I thank my stars now that I did. There has never been anybody like Papa. I mean to say that all in all, he is the most unique human being I have ever known. I am convinced there is nobody in America today anywhere like him. When I am on the streets of this city, among the crowds, I try to burn myself into the "innards" of everyone I see, I listen in on everything I hear, I get their way of talking and looking, and, you know, the amazing thing, is how much alike, [page torn] commonplace, and unin- [page torn] most people are. With what I know now about them I am convinced that if I had never known my father, and that if one day on Washington Street, Boston, I had passed him, talking to someone, gesturing with his big hands, denouncing the Democratic party, wetting his thumb every now and then on his mouth—I say, if I saw this man, wholly absorbed in his conversation, seeing no one on either side of him, I would turn [page torn] and try to find out [page torn] about him. So, for [page torn] sake save those letters, and add to them any of your own you may have. He is headed straight not for one of my plays, but for a series. He dramatized his emotions to a greater extent than anyone I have ever known—consider his expression of "merciful God"—his habit of talking to himself *at* or *against* an imaginary opponent. Save those letters. They are written in his exact conversational tone; I won't have to create imaginary language out

of my own brain—I verily believe I can re-create a character that will knock the hearts out of people by its reality.¹⁹

This is a remarkable letter. Not only does it show us how the characterization of Old Gant came into being, and prove his autobiographical role in Wolfe's work beyond any doubt, but it also shows *how* Wolfe wrote, and how he thought about writing. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, it affords the reader a key for understanding why Wolfe's early work is so often his best work.

Eliza Gant is W. O. Gant's third wife. In *Look Homeward, Angel* she has had only one predecessor, but in the story "The Web of Earth" Wolfe corrects the fictional record to conform to the historical facts. Whereas Eliza seems to embody so many of the characteristics of her mountain family, William Oliver Gant is much less like the people among whom he lives. In the story "The Men of Old Catawba," contained in *From Death to Morning* and probably originally designed, as much of that book was, to be part of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe describes typical North Carolinians as he sees them:

. . . they are cautious and deliberate, slow to make a radical decision. They are great talkers, and believe in prayer and argument. They want to "reason a thing out," they want to "git to the bottom of a thing" through discussion, they want to settle a thing peaceably by the use of diplomacy and compromise. They are perhaps the most immensely conservative people on earth, they reverence authority, tradition, and leadership, but when committed to any decision, they stick to it implacably, and if the decision is war, they will fight to the end with the fury of maniacs.²⁰

The only similarity between these Old Catawbans and Pennsylvania-born W. O. Gant is the love of talk, but as Wolfe pointed out to his mother in the letter previously quoted, William Oliver Wolfe did not talk so much as orate to himself, using his listeners as audience rather than as fellow debaters. The Carolinians are "cautious and deliberate," whereas Gant is mercurial, excitable, audacious. The Carolinians believe in reasoning things out; W. O. Gant is impulsive, heedless of the uses of reason: " 'You lie, woman! By God, you lie!' he thun-

dered magnificently but illogically." Where the Carolinians are conservative, and reverence authority and tradition, Gant is a man, in Wolfe's words, of "wild excess of speech, of feeling, and of gesture." Gant has little of the implacable stick-to-it in him; he is forever closing up his shop and traveling somewhere to escape from the humdrum pursuits of everyday life.

We remember Wolfe's description of the Pentlands assembled for Ben Gant's funeral, "smelling of the earth," "more enduring than life, more strong than death," "each with the familiar marking of the clan." But W. O. Gant was there, too; ". . . and among them, sick and old, leaning upon his cane, moved Gant, the alien, the stranger. He was lost and sorrowful, but sometimes, with a flash of his old rhetoric, he spoke of his grief and the death of his son."²¹

We think of Eliza Gant as belonging in Altamont, where she tends her garden, operates her boarding house, dabbles in real estate, and so on. Old Gant, however, does not belong to any one place. He was "Gant the Far-Wanderer." As Eliza reminisces in "The Web of Earth," "Lord God! I never saw a man like that for wanderin'. I'll vow! a rollin' stone, a wanderer—that's all he'd a-been, oh! California, China, anywheres—forever wantin' to be up and gone, who'd never have accumulated a stick of property if I hadn't married him."²² Gant detested the ownership of land, or affected to do so. "I never want to own another piece of property as long as I live," he declares when Eliza purchases "Dixieland." "It's a curse and a care, and the tax-collector gets all you have in the end."²³ Eliza, on the other hand, was a gleeful landowner and land trader. "Eliza saw Altamont not as so many hills, buildings, people: she saw it in the pattern of a gigantic blueprint. She knew the history of every piece of valuable property—who bought it, who sold it, who owned it in 1893, and what it was now worth."²⁴ The Grantee Deed Index for Buncombe County listed forty-one transactions of real estate in Julia Wolfe's name between 1886 and 1921.²⁵ During the Florida boom she traveled down there and engaged in more land speculation.

Thomas Wolfe's picture of W. O. Gant is of a man of prodigious strength and appetites. "Well, if you call that being sick

and feeble," an onlooker remarks to Old Gant shortly after he has first moved to Altamont, "most of the folks up in this part of the country are already dead and in their graves."²⁶ Gant has just lifted a heavy block of stone onto rolling pins after becoming disgusted with two Negro laborers who were unable to budge it. Wolfe speaks of Gant's "Rabelaisian excess in eating, drinking, and loving." Eliza remembers of him that "that big old pock-marked yellow nigger that they had—*told me* that he could drink more licker than any *four* men he ever saw. . . . He *told me*, mind you, that he'd seen him stand right up at the bar and drink two quart bottles of that old rye licker without stoppin'."²⁷ "Now I've seen some good eaters in my day and time but I've never seen any one who could poke it away the way *he* could," she also declares.²⁸

Gant was a man with a great deal of gusto:

They would watch him in the evening as he turned the corner below with eager strides, follow carefully the processional of his movements from the time he flung his provisions upon the kitchen table to the re-kindling of his fire, with which he was always at odds when he entered, and on to which he poured wood, coal and kerosene lavishly . . . he would empty another half can of kerosene on the howling flame, lunging savagely at it, and muttering to himself.²⁹

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His life was like that river, rich with its own deposited and onward-borne agglutinations, fecund with its sedimental accretions, filled exhaustlessly by life in order to be more richly itself, and this life, with the great purpose of a river, he emptied now into the harbor of his house, the sufficient haven of himself, for whom the gnarled vines wove round him thrice, the earth burgeoned with abundant fruit and blossom, the fire burnt madly.³⁰

Eliza shares none of this gusto and lavishness. She is quiet, patient, enduring. She saves things; her niggardliness is proverbial. She paid her servants "reluctantly, dribbling out their small wages a coin or two at a time, nagging them for their laziness and stupidity."³¹ "Eliza pursed her lips slowly. 'Well,' she said, 'I'll send him to you for a year.' That was the way she

did business. Tides run deep in Sargasso.”³² Thus Eugene went to boarding school.

But although W. O. Gant is a man of strength and appetite, the strength and appetite are in the main frustrated. There is the famous incident of the angel, which Gant purchased when he was young, and finally sold to a call-house madam for the grave of a prostitute. When he was young, Gant had hoped to be able to carve angels in stone, but he had never been able to do it. Gant drowned his frustrations in drink, went on violent sprees that embarrassed his family and himself. He had been married three times; he never achieved love.

Most of Thomas Wolfe's memories of his father are of a sick man. “Why, child! you never knew him till later when he was getting old and tired—,” Eliza tells Eugene in “The Web of Earth.” “I reckon you thought he was bad enough then, but child! child! You don't know, you don't know.”²³ Eugene was quite young when W. O. Gant began to show signs of the disease that eventually killed him. Wolfe was thus more than ever inclined to think of Gant as the frustrated mortal man, who had lost out in his unequal struggle against life and time. In *Of Time and the River* he describes Helen Gant as she waits for her father to die, and thinks of his photographs:

And all these pictures, from first to last, from the little boy to the man with the lank drooping moustaches, had been marked by the same expression: the sharp thin face was always stern and sad with care, the shallow cold-gray eyes always stared out of the bony cage-formation of the skull with a cold mournfulness—the whole impression was always one of gaunt sad loneliness. And it was not the loneliness of the dreamer, the poet, or the misjudged prophet, it was just the cold and terrible loneliness of man, of every man, and of the lost American who has been brought forth naked under immense and lonely skies, to “shift for himself,” to grope his way blindly through the confusion and brutal chaos of a life as naked and unsure as he, to wander blindly down across the continent, to hunt forever for a goal, a wall, a dwelling place of warmth and certitude, a light, a door.³⁴

Gant and Eliza were opposites; Wolfe seemed to see them as Ulysses and Penelope, the Far-Wanderer and the wife at

home. "There was always something strange-like about you that I didn't understand," Eliza tells her husband on his deathbed.³⁵ Eliza has the tribal look; Gant is the alien among them. Eliza droned in interminable drawl, as did Aunt Maw; Gant ranted and roared. Eliza avowedly loved property and ownership; Gant affected to despise them. Gant was a builder of stone monuments to death, who loved to quote from Gray's *Elegy* and remark that we could "take none of it with us"; Eliza would boast that she had "a green thumb," and that "things grow for me."

There is an inescapable, though I think only partly conscious, relationship between the symbolism Wolfe chose for his father and mother, and his concept of time. W. O. Gant is the archetype of mortal man in chronological time, struggling to arrest it, to embrace all experience, to experience all sensation, to sense all stimuli, and failing because his mortality is against him: "He did not know whether the year 1900 marked for him a beginning or an ending; but with the familiar weakness of the sensualist, he resolved to make it an ending, burning the bright fire in him down to a guttering flame."³⁶ Again, "And he thought of how he had set out to get order and position for himself, and of the rioting confusion of his life, the blot and blur of years, and the red waste of his youth. By God! he thought. I'm getting old! Why here?"³⁷ Gant is defeated, just as, in the dialogue between Body and Man that closes *The Web and the Rock*, George Webber realizes that Man has been defeated; Gant is Man caught in present time, losing out in the battle against mortality.

Julia Wolfe and Eliza Gant, on the other hand, seem to be winning the battle. Eliza is patient, enduring, slow-moving, like the mountain people she came from: "Her life was somehow beyond those accidents of time, training, and occasion." Where W. O. Gant "had a tragic consciousness of time—he saw the passionate fulness of his life on the wane, and he cast about him like a senseless and infuriate beast," Eliza at the same period "was beginning to look, with the infinite composure, the tremendous patience which waits through half a lifetime for an event, not so much with certain foresight, as with a prophetic, brooding instinct."³⁸

We recall Wolfe's description, in *The Story of a Novel*, of the theme of the search for a father, "not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united." On most occasions, Gant is obviously unsuitable as a model for this father. Indeed, rather than being external and superior to mortal need, he is in many ways the personification of spent mortality. We see him in the hospital in Baltimore: "This was the sickening and abominable end of flesh, which infected time and all man's living memory of morning, youth, and magic with the death-putrescence of its cancerous taint, and made us doubt that we had ever lived, or had a father, known joy; this was the end, and the end was horrible in ugliness. At the end it was not well."³⁹ How different from Eliza Gant, "triumphant over the ravages of time and accident," representative of a family "more enduring than life, more strong than death."

There is a striking resemblance between the way Wolfe usually referred to Eliza and the family, and his idea of an immutable time which lies behind and in contrast to chronological time. They are more enduring than life and stronger than death, "superior to all loss or waste," "time-devouring," "never-dying, all-consuming," who wait and watch, "all triumphant, while others die," "who lived, and live forever." Wolfe's time immutable was "a kind of eternal and unchanging universe of time against which could be projected the transience of man's life, the bitter briefness of his day"; it is "the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth." Three of those objects of nature are repeatedly linked with the Joyners and Pentlands. They "lived forever as a *river* lives." They are *mountain* people; Eugene hears "the lost voices of his kinsmen in the *mountains* long ago." George Webber heard "the thousand death-devouring voices of the Joyners speaking triumphantly from the darkness of a hundred years, the lost and lonely sorrows of the *hills*." They are always found "smelling of the *earth*," "a race as lawless as the *earth*." Even the ocean symbol is sometimes there, although the sea is the single natural object

of the four named by Wolfe with which he was relatively unfamiliar during his childhood. Even so, in *The Web and the Rock*, "Aunt Maw's world came from some lonely *sea-depth*, some huge abyss and maw of *drowning* time, which consumed all things it fed upon except itself—consumed them with horror, death, the sense of drowning in a *sea of blind, dateless Joyner time*." ⁴⁰

→ Of those four symbols, the only one which is associated with Old Gant is that of the river, and with an important difference in use. When Wolfe likens Gant to a river, it is to show the idea of opulence—"onward borne agglutinations, fecund with its sedimental accretions" and so on. When he uses the river in referring to Eliza, Aunt Maw, the Pentlands and the Joyners, however, it is not lavish richness but steady, timeless flowing, in contradistinction to the lives of men. Obviously it is the latter use which is symbolized in the statement about time immutable.

In his introduction to Wolfe's *Letters to His Mother*, John Skally Terry portrays Mrs. Wolfe as working with time:

Mrs. Wolfe revealed in her conversation that she thought of time in terms of the seasons. She thought of time as might a person of primitive Colonial America—in terms of the birds and flowers of the field, of the moon and the sun and the stars.

Tom knew already that he was the butt of time's great joke; he had none of his mother's power of waiting. His plans and dreams were actually those of a superman. As he said over and over again, he always felt that time slipped away under him like a great river. For his mother, time flowed gently on; she used it for her purposes, and she resigned herself to it. Time was hers.

During years of association with Tom I found that there was hardly a moment when he was not fearful that time was escaping him. He could not keep pace with it; for nearly every appointment, business or personal, he was late. He worked against time, never with it.⁴¹

Even Mrs. Wolfe's commercial activity, real estate, was in its way a device for working *with* time. Wolfe describes her method in *Look Homeward, Angel*:

She judged distances critically, saw at once where the beaten route to an important centre was stupidly circuitous, and looking in a straight line through houses and lots, she said:

"There'll be a street through here some day." ⁴²

She bought her land and she waited. Time would make the land rise in value. All she had to do was to wait.

From childhood on, Thomas Wolfe took the part of his father. The attitude toward time described by Terry is only one example. Like W. O. Gant, Eugene Gant considers himself a stranger and a wanderer. We recall the passage that concludes "The Web of Earth." Eliza has finished telling her story and the story of her husband, "a rollin' stone, a wanderer—that's all he'd a-been." Then, hearing the ships while she is seated in Eugene's New York apartment, she begs him to come home again, and muses, "Lord God! A race of wanderers!" When we remember that it is Eugene who was *writing* the story as well as listening to Eliza Gant, the identification is unmistakable. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, we read that the Gant children would divide themselves up into Gants and Pentlands. Helen, whose love for her father caused a distinct rivalry between her and her mother, taunts Eugene by calling him "a regular little Pentland." "You haven't got a drop of Gant blood in you—Papa's practically said as much—you're Greeley [Pentland] all over again; you're queer. Pentland queerness sticking out all over you." ⁴³ Eugene protested the charge; it was unjustified, he felt. Certainly he did his best to be a Gant. Likewise, the whole notion of the search for a father involves the idea of Eugene-George-Thomas searching for certainty, just as Wolfe imagined his father did, and his father before him.

But Wolfe was his mother as well as his father, Westall as well as Wolfe, Pentland as well as Gant, Joyner as well as Webber: "There were in [George Webber] two powers discrete, two forces of the soul and of inheritance, and now they waged contention daily in his life upon a battlefield where there could never be a victor, where he was caught in his own trap, imprisoned by his own forces, held captive by the very powers which were himself. He understood it all so well, because he had himself created it. He understood it all so well, because it had itself

created him. He hated it so much because he had such deep and everlasting love for it. He fled from it and knew he could never escape."⁴⁴

We recall Wolfe's description of the Joyner clan "toiling up a wooded hill in sad, hushed evening light, to vanish," and the ensuing reverie on their timeless existence in the mountains. The passage is followed immediately, however, by another, most important paragraph:

And *he* belonged to that fatal, mad, devouring world from whose prison there was no escape. He belonged to it, even as three hundred of his blood and bone had belonged to it, and must unweave it from his brain, distill it from his blood, unspin it from his entrails, and escape with demonic and exultant joy into his father's world, new lands and mornings and the shining city—or drown like a mad dog, die!⁴⁵

"His father's world" meant for George Webber the world of satisfying experience, the place of fulfillment—of the mastery over time and space. He felt himself profoundly alienated from his mother's people. The sense of isolation assails him as he walks through the streets of Libya Hill:

The sight of these closed golden homes with their warmth of life awoke in him a bitter, poignant, strangely mixed emotion of exile and return, of loneliness and security, of being forever shut out from the palpable and passionate integument of life and fellowship, and of being so close to it that he could touch it with his hand, enter it by a door, possess it with a word—a word, somehow, he could never speak, a door that, somehow, he would never open.⁴⁶

The day-by-day life of a town in the Carolina mountains was not for him. There was an apparent slowness, lack of imagination, conservatism about it that he thought he could not endure. Again the mother seems to be the symbol. George Webber mentally berates Aunt Maw "because you are a woman, with a woman's niggard smallness about money, a woman's niggard dealing toward her servants, a woman's selfishness, her small humanity of feeling for the dumb, the suffering, and afflicted soul of man."⁴⁷ Similarly Wolfe speaks of Eliza and her

three brothers as having early developed "an insane niggardliness."

The father, on the other hand, symbolized opulence, prodigality, plenty, open-handed generosity; the Pentlands and Joyners simply cannot understand W. O. Wolfe or John Webber. Eliza reminisces about her husband in "The Web of Earth": "Why, Lord! as I said to him, 'The way you make a fire, no wonder. Why any one could make a fire the way you do,' I said, 'pourin' half a can of kerosene oil on it every time. Why, mercy, man!' I cried, 'you'll burn us all up some day, as sure as you're born!'—child, child! that awful waste! that awful extravagance! Oh, roaring up the chimney till the whole house shook with it, you know." ⁴⁸ No insane niggardliness about William Oliver Gant.

Thomas Wolfe gloried in his great appetite, much like his father's. Monroe M. Stearns, in his essay "The Metaphysics of Thomas Wolfe," "explains" Wolfe's predilection for food as being due to his mother's rejection of him, which "caused him later to regard all the women he was to love as food-producers." ⁴⁹ In *Of Time and the River* Wolfe has Eugene Gant visit friends in New York state and stare rapturously at their well-stocked pantry, while the host looks on in delighted amazement: "'Simply incredible!' he was whispering to his sister. 'I've never seen such an expression on any one's face in all my life! It's simply diabolical! When he sees food, he looks as if he's just getting ready to rape a woman!'" ⁵⁰ And there is Wolfe's celebrated remark about beauty in *The Web and the Rock*: "There is no spectacle on earth more appealing than that of a beautiful woman in the act of cooking dinner for someone she loves." ⁵¹

George Webber imagines himself as the true son of his father, who would stride forth exultantly into the world of plenty and prodigality, leaving behind him forever the slow-moving, niggardly mountaineers. George's "spirit flamed beyond the hills, beyond lost time and sorrow, to his father and his father's earth; and when he thought of him his heart grew warm, the hot blood thudded in his veins, he leapt all barriers

of the here and now, and northward, gleaming brightly there beyond the hills, he saw a vision of the golden future in new lands." ⁵² So also Eugene Gant

saw the city as a whole, six million sleepers celled in sleep and walled in night, and girdled by the bracelet of two flashing sea-borne tides that isled them round; he held them legible as minted gold within his hand, he saw them plain as apples in the adyts of his brain. Exultant certitude and joy welled up in him, and he knew that his hunger could eat the earth, his eye and brain gulp down the vision of ten thousand streets, ten million faces, he knew that he could beat and eat them all one day, and that a man was more than a million, stronger than a wall, and greater than a door, and taller than a ninety-storey tower.⁵³

Thus Eugene the Far-Wanderer, and thus Thomas Wolfe. The passage was written in the early 1930's; it was Wolfe's memory of how Eugene Gant felt about the metropolis when he came down from Harvard to live and teach and write there. Yet by the time that he was writing this, he was already well into the period of final distrust and disappointment which would so soon culminate in the symbolic destruction of the city in *You Can't Go Home Again*. What he had considered his father's world of generosity, expansiveness, and prodigality—and though his father did not come from the metropolis but from Pennsylvania, he nevertheless considered the city as his father's world ⁵⁴—had proved to be alien and empty. In his last uncompleted novel he turned back toward his mother's country. And in his dismissal of Esther Jack and the city, in *The Web and the Rock*, he makes his meaning plain. Esther's milieu, he says, is the "streets of life, the manswarm passing in its furious welt, the tumult of great cities. . . ." His is "the lives of secret men who lived alone" in the country. For her, "the memory of great names and faces, the flashing stir and thrust of crowds, the shout of noonday in exultant cities. . . ." For him, the wind howling at night in the forest, "the great em-purpled hills that faded faint and far into the edges of a limitless desire," the cry of train whistles. For her, smoke above Manhattan, "the proud cleaves of ships, and the sea-flung city

masted to its lips with trade and voyages," silks and creamy linens, wines and rare foods, "the ornate masks and gestures of the actors' faces, and the lost burial of their eyes."

For him, the lamplight in a close and shuttered Winter room, the smell of camphor and of apples, the flare and crumble of the ash there in the grate, and the ash of time in Aunt Maw's voice, that death-triumphant Joyner voice, drawling of death and sorrow, the sin and shame of his father's life, and phantoms of lost Joyner kinsmen back in the hills a hundred years ago.⁵⁵

He is of the Carolina mountains, not the city. He is of his mother's people. "I realize more keenly than ever that I come from the old Americans—the people who settled the country, who fought in its wars, who pushed westward," Wolfe wrote to his mother in 1930.⁵⁶ In the same year he wrote his old teacher, Mrs. J. M. Roberts, the "Margaret Leonard" of the first novel, that, "if people now draw back when they see the man, and say: 'I do not know him. This is not the boy they knew'—I can only hope they will not think the man a bad one, and that they will be patient and wait until the boy comes back. And I think he will, after the man has made a long journey."⁵⁷ Artistically, at any rate, he came back home, in *The Hills Beyond*. He has rejected his father's world, the shining city, and the life of the lonely, aloof, exiled artist in that novel. He has turned to Aunt Maw's world. His father has been dead over ten years. The figure of John Webber in *The Hills Beyond* is only a pale carbon of W. O. Gant.

But let us consider George Webber at his most pathological, shortly after he has decided that his is the world of the Joyners and hers the cities, as previously seen in *The Web and the Rock*. One more quarrel follows that one, and George denounces Esther again:

"Yes. You know a lot about it, don't you? When you've got to read the magazines to see what you should like—and you'll go back on your word, you'll change your mind, you'll betray a thing you said was good in thirty seconds, if you find your dirty crowd's against you! . . . The friends and patrons of the arts!" he said with an

infuriated yell of unsure laughter. "Jesus God! That it should come to this!"

"Oh, that it should come to this! That it should come to what? You poor fool, you're raving like a crazy man."

"That the good man—the real artist—the true poet—should be done to death—"

"Oh, done to death, my eye!"

"—by the malice and venom of these million-dollar apes and bastards of the arts and their erotic wives! . . ." ⁵⁸

But while the voice is George Webber's voice, the rhetoric is William Oliver Gant's.

The Way Home

HAVING observed the lineaments of Thomas Wolfe's physical "homes" and of the people who inhabited them, we can now begin to see how the concepts of home and alienation from home match up with his life and work. The conviction that "you can't go home again" appears in the work of Wolfe like a cat prowling an alley—to use one of his own favorite images. It turns up constantly, from the earliest to the latest material. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, shortly before he is to leave Altamont for the North, Eugene Gant is informed by his brother Ben's spirit that he will not be able to return home at the end of the school term as he expects to do; he will never be able to come back. In the story "The Web of Earth" Eliza begs Eugene to come back home again, but realizes even so that like his father before him, Eugene is of a race of wanderers. In *Of Time and the River* Eugene "awakes at morning in a foreign land, and thinks of home." In the first half of the story "The Return of the Prodigal," which Edward C. Aswell says was composed about 1934,¹ Eugene again encounters Ben's ghost, and is asked, "What did you come home for? . . . You know now that you can't go home again!" The last line of *The Web and the Rock* is, "'Yes,' said Body. 'But—you can't go home again.'" And in his last completed novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, Wolfe has Judge Rumford Bland ask George Webber sarcastically, "Do you think you can really go *home* again?"

What the phrase had come to mean for him is told by Wolfe in the interlude which bridges the forty-fourth and forty-fifth chapters of *You Can't Go Home Again*:

The phrase had many implications for him. You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame, back home to exile, to escape to Europe and some foreign land, back home to lyricism, to singing just for singing's sake, back home to aestheticism, to one's youthful idea of "the artist" and the all-sufficiency of "art" and "beauty" and "love," back home to the ivory tower, back home to places in the country, to the cottage in Bermuda, away from all the strife and conflict of the world, back home to the father you have lost and have been looking for, back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time—back home to the escapes of Time and Memory.²

"You can't go home again" finally grew to mean, then, far more than any enforced physical separation from Asheville. It came to signify all forms and kinds of isolation from life. We have only to compare the quotation above to the remarks about the search for a father, in *The Story of a Novel*, to see that Wolfe is both denying the validity of a quest for something external to one's need and superior to one's hunger, and deprecating as well any notions about escaping from chronological time in order to attain a union with immortality by "the escapes of Time and Memory." The distinction between Man and Body, realized and stated so emphatically in the conclusion to *The Web and the Rock*, depended upon the abandonment of this quest for immunity from mortality.

The probability is that Wolfe composed the conclusion to *The Web and the Rock* quite late in his career. In style and attitude it coincides with the conclusion of *You Can't Go Home Again*.³ A sharp division is set up between human ambition and human potentialities, and Wolfe insists upon the inescapability of human limitations, and emphasizes the fallacy of a romantic refusal to admit such limitations. This is precisely the same notion that is put forth in the *You Can't Go Home Again* interlude.

The final material of the two novels was composed by Wolfe during 1937 and 1938. Aswell asserts that when Wolfe left for

the western trip he was rewriting *The Web and the Rock*, and had gotten up to the love scenes. He was also—and characteristically—at work on *The Hills Beyond*, which was to be a separate novel written to give George Webber the proper ancestry.⁴

Yet, sometime in 1937 we find Thomas Wolfe turning back to Eugene Gant to describe his first trip back to Altamont after the publication of his novel seven years before—a novel which George Webber, not Eugene, was actually to publish. And as he describes Eugene's trip southward down the valley of Virginia and into the Blue Ridge Mountains, he makes the remark we have mentioned several times previously:

Quickly, now, the hills drew in out of wide valleydom, and signs of old kept spaciousness vanished into the blue immediate. Here was another life, another language of its own—the life and language of creek, hill, and hollow, of gulch and notch and ridge and knob, and of cabins nestling in their little patches of bottom land.

And suddenly Eugene was back in space and color and in time, the weather of his youth was round him, he was home again.⁵

Here, then, is an apparent contradiction. We are told during this period that “you can't go home again,” “back home to your family, back home to your childhood,” “back home to the escapes of Time and Memory,” and yet Eugene Gant is going home again, “back in space and color and in time.”

We know very well that Thomas Wolfe could and did go back home again, in the artistic sense. We have the fragment of *The Hills Beyond* to show that. During this period of his life—from about 1937 until his death—Wolfe found it possible once again to use the Asheville scene for his fiction. He even talked about writing a novel about the Confederate soldier.⁶ He wrote both the second portion of “The Return of the Prodigal” and the four part story “The Lost Boy,” and the account of George Webber's childhood in *The Web and the Rock*.⁷ And all ten chapters of *The Hills Beyond* are placed in the Carolina mountains. When it came to what really matters in Thomas Wolfe, the writing of his books, the statement that he couldn't go home again seems to be refuted by his work.

Then what *did* Wolfe have in mind when he said that "you can't go home again"?

For answer, let us look again at an incident described in *The Web and the Rock* (pp. 600-12), and which from attitude and idea surely dates from before 1937.⁸ I refer to the episode of the "squeal," in which George Webber protests in anguish to Esther Jack that he has lost his "squeal."

We remember that at first George Webber's squeal was "simply a cry of animal exuberance," but that after several pages of writing about it Wolfe decided that it was "something more than the animal vitality of a boy." We remember that it came to him "upon the lights and hues of a million evanescent things," sometimes in moments of full sensory perception of objects and scenes, more often "from more hidden sources of immense and fathomless exulting." The "squeal" came particularly in moments when George Webber felt a sudden access of release from the confines of physical place and chronological time. And we saw, too, that not long after complaining that he had lost his "squeal," George left Esther Jack and proceeded to Europe, where in a little French town he heard certain night sounds which reminded him of his childhood, and that "a cry of joy, of pain, of twisted grief and ecstasy bursts from his lips in darkness, and he slept."

We remember that all this happened to George Webber after he had written the novel "Home To Our Mountains," and that following the episode in the French town, George made his way to Paris, where he saw his face in the dark pool of a store mirror, and then to Germany, where he got into a fight at the *Oktoberfest*. Then in the hospital he looked again into a mirror, and realized that Man and Body were two instead of one.

What I want to suggest is that George speaks as usual for Thomas, and that Thomas Wolfe was not lying when he said that his alter ego George was losing his "squeal." It was Wolfe who like Wordsworth before him was getting older and who was finding it more and more difficult to recapture the vision and the gleam.

The novel *Look Homeward, Angel* was the product of just

such a vision and gleam. For proof, let us again examine Wolfe's descriptions of George Webber and Eugene Gant at work on that first novel, and his own description of himself at work in *The Story of a Novel*.

In the last-named book Wolfe describes his stay in London, where by day he would write and by night think of himself in London and "hear the solid, leather footbeat of the London bobby as he came by my window, and remember that I was born in North Carolina and wonder why the hell I was now in London. . . ." He continues, "I was very young at the time, and I had the kind of wild, exultant vigor which a man has at that period of life. . . . Like Mr. Joyce, I wrote about things I had known, the immediate life and experience that had been familiar to me in my childhood. . . . my book, the characters with which I had peopled it, the color and weather of the universe which I had created, had possessed me, and so I wrote and wrote with that bright flame with which a young man writes who has never been published. . . ." ⁹

Eugene Gant in *Of Time and the River* is in the town of Tours, where he has arrived after a spell in Paris. He has had some turbulent doings, and now he settles down in the old French town, and straightaway he falls into a long period of the contemplation of the past. "Day passed into night, night merged into day again like the unbroken weaving of a magic web, and he stayed on, week after week, plunged in a strange and legendary spell of time that seemed suspended and detached from the world of measurable event, fixed in the unmoving moment, unsilent silence, changeless change." ¹⁰ The whole business revolved around the remembrance of his childhood:

Day and night now, from dawn to dark, from sleeping until waking, in that strange spell of time and silence that was neither dream nor sleep nor waking vision, but that like an enchantment was miraculously composed of all, obsessed as a man exiled, banished, or condemned by fate to live upon a desert island without possibility of escape or return—he thought of home.¹¹

It was at this period, Wolfe goes on to say, that Eugene Gant finally began to write his novel: "Useless, fragmentary, and inchoate as were these first abortive efforts, he began to write now like a madman. . . . Gripped by that ungovernable desire, all ordered plans, designs, coherent projects for the work he had set out to do went by the board, were burned up in the flame of a quenchless passion, like a handful of dry straw. . . ." The ordeal is almost like giving birth:

The words were wrung out of him in a kind of bloody sweat, they poured out of his finger tips, spat out of his snarling throat like writhing snakes; he wrote them with his heart, his brain, his sweat, his guts; he wrote them with his blood, his spirit; they were wrenched out of the last secret source and substance of his life.

And in those words was packed the whole image of his bitter homelessness, his intolerable desire, his maddened longing for return. In those wild and broken phrases was packed the whole bitter burden of his famished, driven, over-laden spirit—all the longing of the wanderer, all the impossible and unutterable homesickness that the American, or any man on earth, can know.¹²

Thus the young Eugene Gant sat down and began his novel. And in *The Web and the Rock* the young George Webber is still writing on it, having come back to New York with the same Esther that Eugene met abroad as *Of Time and the River* closed. Indeed, Aswell declares that the love story that occupies most of the second part of *The Web and the Rock* was actually written in terms of Eugene, not George, and was originally destined for inclusion in the manuscript which became *Of Time and the River*.¹³ Here is George at work in New York:

For the first time, now, his memory seemed to be in complete and triumphant possession of every moment in its life. He could not only see and remember to their remotest detail every place where he had lived, every country he had visited, every street he had ever walked upon, everyone he had ever known or spoken to, together with the things they said and did; he remembered as well a thousand fleeting and indefinable things which he had seen for a flick of an eye in some lost and dateless moment of the swarming past. He could remember a woman's voice and laughter in a leafy street

at home, heard twenty years ago, in darkness and the silence of an unrecorded night; the face of a woman passing in another train, an atom hurled through time somewhere upon the inland immensity of the nation; the veins that stood out on an old man's hands; the falling of a single drop of water in a dank, dark, gloomy hall; the passing of cloud shadows on a certain day across the massed green of the hills at home; the creaking of a bough in winter wind; a corner light that cast its livid glare upon the grey, grimed front of a dismal little house. These and a thousand other memories now returned, for what reason he did not know, out of the furious welter of the days.¹⁴

What is going on in these passages, showing as they do the artist at work on the first novel, is nothing more or less than what Wordsworth called the process of "emotion recollected in tranquillity." If the descriptions themselves seem far from tranquil, it must be remembered that the time of composition represents a period of temporary personal tranquillity for the author, as Wordsworth asserted, and that the emotion is coming out in the memory, not the day-by-day life of the author at the time of writing. Eugene has battled his way across France with Starwick and the two women. He has fallen in love with one of them, and has been rebuffed. He has realized that his one-time idol Starwick is a homosexual, who cannot love women, and that despite this, the girl that he loves is in love with Starwick. All of this had built up into a final emotional explosion in which he had attacked the now hated Starwick, and yet this has served only to heighten his own frustration. Now Eugene is physically and emotionally exhausted, and he flees to the little French town, where gradually he recovers his balance, and for the first time in many months has reached a condition of stability.

As Wordsworth explained the process in the Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), "I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity; the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradu-

ally produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind." ¹⁵ *Look Homeward, Angel* is such a book of recollection, and its art is that of previous emotion re-created. It will be noted that most of the phenomena that Wolfe chooses to illustrate the workings of his memory, in the previous descriptions from *Of Time and the River* and *The Web and the Rock*, are duplicated in the passage about the "squeal" in the latter book. In writing *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe was faithfully doing what he had promised to do in the letter to his mother, previously mentioned, in which he asked her to save his father's letters: "I won't have to create imaginary language out of my own brain—I verily believe I can re-create a character that will knock the hearts out of people by its reality." ¹⁶ Indeed, in the very next letter to his mother after that one, in May of 1923, Wolfe had talked of the meaning of beauty as he saw it, and had proceeded to illustrate the definition with a series of reminiscences which in fact constitute much of the plot of *Look Homeward, Angel*. He began with a boy in the backyard in North Carolina in springtime, and then went into the character of his father, his mother at Ben's bedside, the mountains and his own youthful travels through the South with his mother, Grover's death in St. Louis, and so on. "I know there is nothing so commonplace, so dull, that is not touched with nobility and dignity," he declared. "And I intend to wreak out my soul on paper and express it all. This is what my life means to me: I am at the mercy of this thing and I will do it or die. I never forget; I have never forgotten. I have tried to make myself conscious of the whole of my life since first the baby in the basket became conscious of the warm sunlight on the porch. . . . This is why I think I'm going to be an artist. The things that really mattered sunk in and left their mark." ¹⁷ At that time, of course, Wolfe was still a student at Harvard, apparently intent on becoming a playwright. Evidently he had planned to use the story of his past as material for plays. It was not until later, if the letters to his mother are any indication, that he began to be interested in the idea of writing a novel.

It is here, I believe, that we can really understand why

Thomas Wolfe's first novel is his best novel; why, alone of the four completed novels, *Look Homeward, Angel* seems to possess both textural firmness and structural progression. Given the autobiographical method that Wolfe adopted, the novel of childhood *had* to be the only novel with a real beginning, middle, and end to it. It was the only novel the plot of which had been concluded, as far as the protagonist was concerned. It was a *bildungsroman*: a novel of growth. One can say of it what Karl Viëtor said of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*: "The process of maturation is the nucleus about which the colorful stories of the novel crystallize."¹⁸ Where other novelists might attain the perspective needed for formal artistic work by the use of dramatic methods, Wolfe had only the perspective of memory. In the case of *Look Homeward, Angel*, "his memory seemed to be in complete and triumphant possession of every moment of its life." The important word here is "complete"—Eugene Gant's first twenty years are complete, and are an entity. They begin with birth; they end as he grows up and leaves town. If he is still far from being fully mature, he is at least immature on a young man's terms and not an adolescent boy's.

It is the perspective of memory that provides the book with its rich texture and its believable, three-dimensional characters. Gant is believable because Thomas Wolfe believed in his father as a person. He is believable because Wolfe the young man remembered his father of his childhood years better than he remembered the persons he encountered in his adult years. The downtown portion of Altamont, described in the "walk through the city" of the twenty-fourth chapter, previously mentioned, is vivid and possesses color and depth because Thomas Wolfe's memories of it were deeper, more vivid and colorful than his memories of, say, Broadway or Flatbush Avenue. Here we return to Wordsworth's dictum about the child possessing more nearly unstinted powers of sensory receptivity:

. . . as a child, I held unconscious intercourse
With the eternal beauty, drinking in
A pure organic pleasure from the lines

*Of curling mist, or from the level plain
Of waters colour'd by the steady clouds.*

(The Prelude, I)

The memories that come to George Webber in New York and Eugene Gant in Tours are the stored-up recollections of childhood emotions, and the memory that was re-creating them had received them for safe-keeping at a time when it possessed all its youthful ability to extract from the deep-drinking senses the full report, when the twelve-year-old George could tell himself that "this is the way things are, I see and know this is the way things are, I understand this is the way things are: and, Great God! Great God! this being just the way things are, how strange, and plain, and savage, sweet and cruel, lovely, terrible, and mysterious, and how unmistakable and familiar all things are!"¹⁹

Look Homeward, Angel, then, is a novel composed from memories stored up when the rememberer "saw things whole," and saw them in depth. The wealth of fine scenes in it is made possible because Thomas Wolfe's tremendous powers of recollection were working at full force, and were drawing upon the memories of a childhood in which the child who was father to the adult artist did indeed "see things." The first novel, therefore, was the unified and successive record of moments in which the author felt that sensation of "stopping" chronological time and transcending physical place, of being able both to recapture past time through memory and to see out laterally on all sides into infinite space, possible when the forward movement of time and change was suspended: "The past became as real as the present, and he lived in the events of twenty years ago with as much intensity and as great a sense of actuality as if they had just occurred. He felt that there was no temporal past of present, no *now* more living than any reality of *then*: the fiction of temporal continuity was destroyed, and his whole life became one piece with the indestructible unity of time and destiny."²⁰

If *Look Homeward, Angel* is a book involving the wholeness, harmony and radiance of a completed remembered time, however, what of the three subsequent novels? They are cer-

tainly not complete entities; the total impact is far from harmonious; and luminous passages are mixed in with opaque and soggy passages. Mr. Bernard DeVoto is not always wise or just about Thomas Wolfe, but he is more right than wrong when he remarks that in *Of Time and the River*, "the placental material had enormously grown and, what was even more ominous, it now had a rationalization. It was as unshaped as before, but now it had been retroactively associated with the dark and nameless heaving of the voiceless and unknown womb of Time, and with the unknown and voiceless fury of the dark and lovely and lost America."²¹ The death of Old Gant in *Of Time and the River* is perhaps as good as or better than anything Wolfe ever wrote; but the long, empty passages about Eugene the Far-Wanderer storming the earth, and the whole Starwick episode in France, show Wolfe at his worst, self-pitying, histrionic, windy. Everything is overstated. As Mr. DeVoto admits, "there were still passages where Mr. Wolfe was a novelist not only better than most of his contemporaries but altogether out of their class"—enough of them, in fact, to make the second novel a more important book, for all its many faults, than many another well-tailored but uninspired novel. But compared to the novel that preceded it, *Of Time and the River* was disappointing.

Nor did the next two novels, both published posthumously, improve the situation too much. If there is less of the "O lost!" in *You Can't Go Home Again*, it is also a flat book, with little really exciting work contained in it. George Webber's new-found "objectivity" about life is displayed not in an objective, third-person novel about "created" characters, but in a subjective, first-person novel about a man who is trying ponderously to be objective and fair-minded. And its predecessor, *The Web and the Rock*, while it does represent something more of a contained unit, also contains, in the chapters about love life with Esther Jack, some of Wolfe's most psychopathic writing. It ends on a note of acceptance and understanding—qualities which have not, however, been displayed in the writing of what went before that last chapter, nor in much of the novel that followed it.

The reason for Wolfe's lack of success in the novels that followed *Look Homeward, Angel* is not too difficult to discover, if we keep in mind that Wolfe is always an autobiographical writer, and that his theory of fiction still involved, almost always, what he told his mother he was going to do with the figure of his father in his projected plays: "I verily believe I can re-create a character that will knock the hearts out of people by its reality." It is simply the ramifications of the "squeal" theory again—and with these novels, the frequent absence of the "squeal." Wolfe was not merely imagining things when he had George Webber complain that he had lost the "squeal." He was by that time in the situation of the poet who complained that "there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth," and asked,

*Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?*

In describing his adult life Thomas Wolfe was increasingly unable to draw upon memories in the richness and depth that those of his childhood had afforded. There were still occasional moments "of extraordinary splendour and beauty," but they were occurring far less often. We recall that he wrote to his mother that unlike his father the people he was meeting as a young man in Boston were not very exceptional or interesting: "I try to burn myself into the 'innards' of everyone I see, I listen in on everything I hear, I get their way of talking and looking, and you know, the amazing thing, is how much alike, [page torn] commonplace, and unin- [page torn] most people are." ²² Original and arresting as William Oliver Wolfe undoubtedly was, there could not have been all that difference between him and the people Wolfe was meeting in his Harvard years and thereafter. It was not in the persons being viewed, but in the viewer's ability to absorb what he saw, that the real difference lay.

Wolfe wrote of Eugene Gant at the age of twelve that "the prison walls of self had closed entirely round him: he was walled completely by the esymplastic [*sic*] power of his imagination—he had learned by now to project mechanically, before

the world, an acceptable counterfeit of himself that would protect him from intrusion.”²³ But in this verdict Wolfe was anticipating too much; the evidence of *Look Homeward, Angel* is that not for several years more would Eugene and his creator begin seeing things entirely in terms of the prison walls of self. More to the point, perhaps, is a remark he made in a letter to his mother written while a student in Chapel Hill: “I am changing so rapidly that I find myself an evergrowing source of interest. Sounds egotistical, doesn’t it?”²⁴ It is with the life described in *Of Time and the River*, as originally seen by Wolfe the young man, that we begin to get in quantity a view of the world that is entirely subjective, viewed only on those planes on which the author comes into personal contact with the external world. With this novel most of Wolfe’s characters begin to be presented in one dimension only, and to take on life only as they affect the autobiographical protagonist. It had never occurred to the child Eugene to “accept” or “reject” the personalities of his father, or mother, or sisters or brothers. A value judgment may have come later, but the child’s consciousness took them in completely, to be remembered completely. But if the adult Eugene didn’t like someone, he ignored him. And when he did like someone, he did so only in terms of certain interests. Thus Starwick’s appeal for Eugene in the early pages of *Of Time and the River* involves “literature” and “culture,” and little else. Therefore we see Starwick that way, too, because that is all that Eugene’s memory of Starwick consisted of when Wolfe sat down to write the early chapters of the novel. Later in the novel—and later in Wolfe’s life²⁵—he saw Starwick as bored superesthete and homosexual, and so that is the only way we see him.

The Wolfe of this period, then, was entirely dependent as a writer upon the quality of his memory, and the quality of the memories of manhood was infinitely poorer than those of childhood. There was far less perspective, and there was not the “space, color and time” that the memories of his youth provided. Thus we get three novels which in varying degrees lack perspective, lack dimension, and lack the rich representation

of life in space, color, and time that *Look Homeward, Angel* afforded.

Why did Wolfe have to write that kind of novel, then? Certainly James Joyce was able to avoid doing so. Joyce the adult artist saw art in terms of his childhood and young manhood in Dublin. Memories of life in Paris, Zurich, and Trieste do not intrude into *Ulysses*; even the dreamer of *Finnegans Wake* creates his myth in Irish terms.

One answer, of course, is that he was Thomas Wolfe. Why, indeed, did he write at all? Why, of a family of six children, was he the only writer? To this question we can give no answer. We shall have to accept the fact that Wolfe somehow was gifted with the perceptions and drives that go to make up a writer, and confine our speculations to some of the reasons why Wolfe did the particular kind of writing that he did. And if we keep in mind the intangible personal element there, too, we can nevertheless point to certain factors we have observed in Thomas Wolfe's environment which might have contributed toward the shaping of his life and work. Granted the initial subjectivity, we can proceed to examine the form it took.

We may call one such factor operating on Thomas Wolfe, for want of a better name, the historical, meaning the history of the region in which Wolfe grew up. Wolfe was a Southerner, just as William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson and Caroline Gordon, to name a few of his contemporaries, are Southerners. All of these writers grew up in a bounded geographical region, and all of them began during the 1920's to produce fiction and poetry about the South. The places in the South in which they were reared were diverse; offhand there would seem to be as much difference as similarity between Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi and Altamont in Old Catawba.

Nevertheless, the states of the old Southern Confederacy shared a common history. John Peale Bishop has contended that "the Confederacy, for all the brevity of its formal existence, achieved more surely the qualities of a nation than the enduring Republic has been able to do. There were more emotions

shared; its soldiers knew how to speak to one another or without speaking to arrive at a common understanding. Their attitude toward life was alike, and when they faced death it was in the same way." ²⁶ Whether or not this is so, it is undeniably true that North Carolina no less than Mississippi was primarily an agrarian community, that no less than Mississippi it suffered defeat in war, and that it came under the political and economic control of an industrial economy.

Of the seven modern Southern writers just mentioned, including Wolfe, not a one of them has failed somewhere in his work to make strong reference to Appomattox Court House and its aftermath. As C. Vann Woodward has written,

. . . the inescapable facts of history were that the South had repeatedly met with frustration and failure. It had learned what it was to be faced with economic, social, and political problems that refused to yield to all the ingenuity, patience, and intelligence that a people could bring to bear upon them. It had learned to accommodate itself to conditions that it swore it would never accept and it had learned the taste left in the mouth by the swallowing of one's own words. It had learned to live for long decades in quite un-American poverty, and it had learned the equally un-American lesson of submission.²⁷

Whatever defeat in the war might have meant for the South, it had this result: from Altamont to Yoknapatawpha it brought on several decades of grinding poverty, and it turned an agrarian society inward upon itself to fight for life on the land. Wolfe writes that Eliza Gant and her three older brothers "had passed their childhood in the years following the war. The poverty and privation of these years had been so terrible that none of them ever spoke of it now, but the bitter steel had sheared into their hearts, leaving scars that would not heal. The effect of these years upon the oldest children was to develop in them an insane niggardliness, an insatiate love of property. . . ." ²⁸

Meanwhile, all around the South, to the north and west, industrial "progress" was in full swing, its way no longer impeded in Congress by a conscious agrarian minority. When by the late 1870's and early 1880's the South, following the leader-

ship of Henry W. Grady and his "New South" supporters, began to emulate the ways of the conqueror, it had far to go to catch up, and it was some time before the impact of industrialism began to be felt in any but the large cities of the South. "The fact of the matter," Woodward writes, "was that, in spite of the spectacular rise of completely new cities in an old section of the country and the growth of many old ones in the last two decades of the century, the sum total of urbanization in the South was relatively unimportant. . . . The Southern people remained, throughout the rise of the 'New South,' overwhelmingly a country people, by far the most rural section of the Union." ²⁹

When finally the new ways did begin to penetrate the South, and the smaller cities, towns, and rural districts began to become more industrial-minded, the transition was naturally sharp and abrupt, vivid enough to dramatize itself to the region's young writers. "After the [first world] war," Allen Tate has written, "the South again knew the world, but it had a memory of another war; with us, entering the world once more meant not only the obliteration of the past but a heightened consciousness of it; so that we had, at any rate in Nashville, a double focus, a looking two ways, which gave a special dimension to the writing of our school—not necessarily a superior quality—which American writing as a whole seemed to lack." ³⁰

At its most usable, what this "looking two ways" meant is what we get in all the better writers of the South today: a sense and awareness of the past as it contrasts with and acts upon the present, a feeling for tradition and continuity which in turn dramatizes and intensifies change. It is a constant theme in Faulkner: "The past is never dead," Gavin Stevens tells Temple Drake in *Requiem for a Nun*, "It's not even past." We recall, too, the remarks about the never-ending Gettysburg, cited in a previous chapter. Similarly, Robert Penn Warren's best novel, *All the King's Men*, has as one of its key meanings the failure of modern men to come to terms with their past. Indeed, the very last sentence of the novel makes the point: "But that will be a long time from now, and soon we shall go

out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time."

Wolfe's work is full of the consciousness of the past, of course. He was, as we have seen, tremendously aware of and curious about his own past, his mother's and father's past, and of the past of his region. In *The Web and the Rock* he discusses the young Southern writers of his generation and their historical memories, and reaches conclusions not unlike those cited by Tate: "They had come out—another image now—into a kind of sunlight of another century. They had come out upon the road again. The road was being paved. More people came now. They cut a pathway to the door again. Some of the weeds were clear. Another house was built. They heard wheels coming and the world was *in*, yet they were not yet wholly of that world."³¹

But as we have seen, the "double focus, a looking two ways" in Thomas Wolfe is not merely a matter of a heightened historical perspective; it is an obsession. Whereas Faulkner and Warren can examine the old and the new in their communities ironically, praising or criticizing, always with detachment, Wolfe is so caught up in the contemplation of change that it governs all his reactions both as a man and as a writer. Because he is completely the subjectivist, the one phenomenon of which he is always conscious is change, as we have noted previously. Things are constantly changing before his eyes. Change is at the root of all the preoccupation with time and space. It is one of the earliest sensations of which Eugene Gant is conscious:

The mountains were his masters. They rimmed in life. They were the cup of reality, beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change. Old haunt-eyed faces glimmered in his memory. He thought of Swain's cow, St. Louis, death, himself in the cradle. He was the haunter of himself, trying for a moment to recover what he had been part of. He did not understand change, he did not understand growth. He stared at his framed baby picture in the parlor, and turned away sick with fear and the effort to touch, retain, grasp himself for only a moment.³²

Why this preoccupation with change? It would seem that one of the most obvious reasons for Eugene Gant's obsession with change, as well as George Webber's, is that they are both born amid change. Whenever Wolfe discusses Asheville, whether as Altamont in *Look Homeward, Angel* or Libya Hill in *The Web and the Rock* and *The Hills Beyond*, he begins by describing the transition from the quiet mountain town that was originally there into the hustling "Greater Asheville" of the boom. We have already seen that the atmosphere of Altamont and Libya Hill is charged with talk of "progress." Between 1900, the year of Wolfe's birth, and 1920, the year he left for Harvard, his home town doubled its population, from 14,694 at the turn of the century to 28,504 twenty years later. And during the 1920's, when the boom was at its height, the slogan was "100,000 by 1930."³³ In his essay on Wolfe entitled "Poet of the Boom," Jonathan Daniels describes the frantic opportunism of Asheville during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The tourist trade burgeoned, the millionaires such as George Vanderbilt and E. W. Grove had come up to help and lead the way, and they found "native mountaineers ready to follow the patterns they set."³⁴ Wolfe has described all this in great detail, and he has also shown us that the boom attitudes were more or less forcibly grafted onto the ways of a quiet mountain community which still retained so many of the customs and outlooks of the agrarian past. The old ways which were slowly losing ground but which were deep-seated and persistent, and the new ways which were gaining but which still had considerable inertia to overcome, were both there in Eugene Gant's Altamont. Repeatedly we see Eugene or George Webber lamenting the passing of the quiet town of early childhood. Eugene hears sounds in the French town of Dijon which remind him of home:

The memory of the lost America—the America of twenty years ago, of quiet streets, the time-enchanted spell and magic of full June, the solid, lonely, liquid shuffle of men in shirt-sleeves coming home, the leafy fragrance of the cooling turnip-greens, and screens that slammed, and sudden silence—had long since died, had been

drowned beneath the brutal flood-tide, the fierce stupefaction of that roaring surge and mechanic life which had succeeded it.³⁵

In *The Web and the Rock* there is a long description of George Webber as he contemplates the poor whites of Libya Hill, who have come out of the hills to work in the expanding factories and live in the slums of the growing town:

The congress of their foul and bloody names—the loathsome company of these Iras, Docks and Reeses, the Jeters, Zebs and Greeleys of these poor-white slums—return to torment memory now with the white sear of horrible and instant recognition. Why? Because these people are the mountain people. These people are the poor-white litter of the hills. These people—Oh! it is intolerable, but true—these people came out of his mother's world, her life! He hears lost voices in the mountains long ago! They return to him from depth of sourceless memory, from places he has never viewed, from scenes that he has never visited—the whole deposit of inheritance, the lives and voices of lost people in the hills a hundred years ago.³⁶

This human debris of the coming of "progress" to Libya Hill is painfully obvious to young George Webber as he grows up in town, even if the Greater Libya Hill Chamber of Commerce ignores it. Libya Hill and Altamont were on the make; they were looking for money, and money was constantly on their minds. And the impact of business ways and commercial ideals on a small, quiet mountain town could only produce the stress and strain that always accompanies social change. To anyone of more than ordinary sensibilities who happened to be growing up in the town, it was apparent on many levels. And to someone like Wolfe, it undoubtedly made a strong impression. Thus Wolfe's interest in Asheville's past, the Civil War, the settling of the mountains by colonists, is one symptom of the preoccupation with change, and represents an effort on his part to hold onto what was apparently being lost all around him, as the town became the city.

If the example of the community and what was happening to it were not enough, there was the abundant example of the split between the old and the new right within his own

family. And in any attempt to understand some of the factors which contributed to the shaping of Wolfe's work, an important consideration must be the divided loyalties and contradictory attitudes of his parents. We have seen that Julia Wolfe, who came from a mountain family, seemed to her son to possess so many of the traits of rural Southerners: the strong sense of familial ties, the love of the land, the triumphal faith in mystic doings among the supernatural, the patience and strength of the hill people. We remember John Skally Terry's remark about Mrs. Wolfe's conceiving of time in terms of the seasons, of colonial, pre-industrial America.

Yet grafted into this—paradoxically growing out from it in some ways—was a grasping desire for property and wealth. She was a woman who bought and sold property, dreamed of property, fretted over property. She ran a large boarding house, denied her husband and family, in order to earn money for more real estate. She gleefully went to court in property litigations. Throughout *Look Homeward, Angel* runs the theme of Eugene's horror and dislike of his mother's penuriousness and her shameless commercialism. Early in his life he is sent out on the street to sell magazines, then to deliver newspapers. At church his friends torment him about it. Eliza takes him on train trips to various resorts, and makes him walk about the streets passing out cards advertising summer vacations in "Dixieland in Beautiful Altamont, America's Switzerland," or sell magazines. "It won't hurt you to do a little light work after school," she tells him. "You've got to help me drum up some trade, if we're to live, boy," she declares again, "with the lip-pursing, mouth-tremulous jocularity that was coming to wound him so deeply, because he felt it was only an obvious mask for a more obvious insincerity." She sends him to study under a crippled tutor in Florida, and then forces the cripple to accept a reduced fee:

He writhed as he saw himself finally a toughened pachyderm in Eliza's world—sprucing up confidently, throwing his shoulders back proudly, making people "think he was somebody" as he cordially acknowledged an introduction by producing a card setting forth the joys of life in Altamont and at Dixieland, and seized

every opening in social relations for the purpose of "drumming up trade." He hated the jargon of the profession, which she had picked up somewhere long before, and which she used constantly with such satisfaction—smacking her lips as she spoke of "transients," or of "drumming up trade." In him, as in Gant, there was a silent horror of selling for money the bread of one's table, the shelter of one's walls, to the guest, the stranger, the unknown friend from out the world; to the sick, the weary, the lonely, the broken, the knave, the harlot, and the fool.³⁷

There is an image that runs through Wolfe's work whenever he discusses his childhood. It is one of Eugene twisting his neck about, and lifting his foot from the ground, in shame. The shame is always caused by something that Eliza does which embarrasses Eugene's sense of honor and decency. Even after Eugene is in college, and Eliza comes to Pulpit Hill to see him, she embarrasses him by passing out cards advertising Dixieland to one of his college friends, offering him a commission on any trade he can send her way.

We have already noted the preponderance of commercial imagery in *Look Homeward, Angel*. We can see the results of economics in the home, too, in the letters Wolfe wrote his mother from Cambridge, as he agonizingly begs her for enough money to live on, feels impelled to assure her each time that very soon now commercial success awaits his work, and then begins to rationalize his apparent lack of success by desperately deriding the artistic standards of his family and community: "And what do they care, in their mean little hearts for a dream or a poem? Oh I know them—know them—know them to the bottom of their base, greedy, money-loving little souls—I know how the vapid sneer will change to the fawning smile once they hear you have prospered and that it has gone well with you."³⁸

In *Look Homeward, Angel*, Ben Gant is depicted by Wolfe as the victim of his parents' materialism. It is their personal materialism, however, and not a criticism of the community's economic ways. As has been previously shown, Wolfe's quarrel with his home town, up until the publication of the first novel and the impact of the depression, is mainly that it does

not properly appreciate and honor art and artists. He seldom links Eliza's penuriousness to what is going on in the community around her.

Yet it is obvious—and it soon became obvious to Wolfe, too—that Eliza was only doing what so many of her fellow town-folk were doing, too, when she lay awake at night dreaming of ways to gain money for land speculation. Eugene's attitude toward Eliza mirrors the conflict of the old ways with the new. Drawn to Eliza and the quiet ways of a small town by the instinctive ties of family and by inclination and inheritance, Eugene is only confused and hurt by his mother's avaricious materialism. The unnatural union, in her personality, of mountain woman and land speculator bewilders him, feeds his sense of insecurity and growing dissatisfaction.

Add to this the violent conflict in ways of thought and action, and the resulting two-way tug on his loyalties, which are embodied in the opposed personalities of his mother and father, and we see even more closely what some of the roots of Thomas Wolfe's divided sensibility may be, and why he would be particularly conscious of insecurity and terrified by change.

All through Wolfe's childhood there is this sense of division and conflict: between mother and father, between the historical past and the turbulent commercial present, between the mountain town that was and the "Greater Asheville" that developed before his eyes, between art and commerce, between what he felt with his instincts and what he saw with his eyes, between love and self-interest. The result was that he went eagerly off northward into "exile," determined to shake off forever the dust of Asheville and its ugly ways, and yet at the same time anxious to the point of desperation to make a smashing success that would force "them" to respect him. In Jonathan Daniels' words,

Wolfe himself was a part—almost the essence—of driving, hungry, resort-town frenzy which stripped all the prettiness, all the dignity, off the town. His own book, written with the same eager fury which his mother gave to real estate, hit the town almost like the collapse of the real estate boom and left people almost as naked. And it left nobody so hurt and naked as himself—in loneliness

under anger—even if the book also clothed him, at last, with the appreciation he so much wanted and which his work so deserved.

He was a part of it and he never escaped, a part of a town properly famed for the loveliness around it, and, also, a town fated to violence and pettiness, greed and frustration.³⁹

When he left Asheville and arrived at Harvard, eager to become a famous playwright, the pattern was already formed. The years that follow—as Wolfe fails as a playwright, engages in a battle with the city which he first loses, then wins, then loses again, roams Europe, falls in love, writes his novel, falls out of love, becomes famous, horrifies his home town and feels himself forever alienated from it—the adult years only continue and expand the conflict within him, the two-way wrench between opposing loyalties evident from childhood on. And the product of all the frustration and conflict is the continuing sense of inadequacy and of failure, of time slipping away while he is accomplishing nothing, of an intolerable past and an empty, uncertain future. At times the whole world of life and death seemed almost unreal to him. “Sometimes Ben and Papa seem so far away, one wonders if it were a dream,” he wrote his mother in 1923. “Again, they come back as vividly as if I had seen them yesterday. Each tone of their voice, each peculiarity of their expression is engraved upon my mind—yet it seems strange that it all could have happened to me, that I was a part of it. Some day I expect to wake up and find my whole life has been a dream.”⁴⁰

Part of the answer, then, to the question of why it was necessary for Thomas Wolfe to follow up his first novel with three novels which were so subjectively autobiographical that chapter by chapter they depended upon their author’s uneven memories for their reality, is, that in them he was forced to try to understand himself. Thrown on his own resources at an early age to brood, terrified by change which was transforming everything he knew, finding turbulence and conflict in all that went on around him, he was driven to try to understand what he was, in order to live with himself. Wolfe as a writer is always remembering, sifting, and experiencing, trying to

decide what was important. More than for most artists it was essential for his peace of mind that he retravel the road already taken, relive what had happened to him again by memory so as to understand it better, and set down his considered verdict. He could not get beyond himself; nothing else seemed important. There was so much that had happened that he did not understand. And the older he got, the more there seemed to remember; he was apparently fighting a losing battle with chronological time and mortality. Undigested experience kept piling up. "Here I am!" George Webber tells Randy Shepperton; "Time gets away from me before I know that it has gone! Time!"⁴¹ We recall the dialogue at the conclusion to *The Web and the Rock*, in which Man finally realizes that he had been driving Body beyond the limits of its capacity because "it could not do the inhuman task he set for it, hated it because its hunger could not match his hunger, which was for the earth and all things living in it."⁴²

Yet while it was seemingly a losing battle with time, actually this was not altogether so. After all, it is possible to "do something" about the past; otherwise there would be no such thing, for example, as psychoanalysis. The conflicts and pressures which were hindering and rendering inadequate the mind's ability to understand itself and evaluate its experience, were the product of experience, and therefore a part of the man's memory. And if memory can bring back the original distorting circumstances, so that they can be reviewed again and their falsifications recognized and discounted, then the mind can overcome its own hindrances. How like, among other things, the process of psychoanalysis⁴³ is Wolfe's description of his career, in the letter to Foxhall Edwards which closes *You Can't Go Home Again*:

There was a huge web in which I was caught, the product of my huge inheritance—the torrential recollectiveness, derived out of my mother's stock, which became a living, million-fibered integument that bound me to the past, not only of my own life, but of the very earth from which I came, so that nothing in the end escaped from its inrooted and all-feeling explorativeness. . . . So did it all revive in the ceaseless pulsings of the giant ventricle, so

did the plant go back, stem by stem, root by root, and filament by filament, until it was complete and whole, compacted of the very earth that had produced it, and of which it was itself the last and living part.

You stayed with me like the rock you are until I unearthed the plant, followed it back through every fiber of its pattern to its last and tiniest enrootment in the blind, dumb earth.⁴⁴

The result of all this is seen in the dialogue that closes *The Web and the Rock*—which, as previously noted, was probably composed well after most of the material in that book and the novel that followed it—and in the paragraph from *You Can't Go Home Again* in which Wolfe explains the meaning of the “you can't go home again” theme. It is the acknowledgment of limitations, the acceptance of the conditions of mortality, the realization that there is no use or need to “recapture the past” instead of, and as a substitute for, experiencing the present. When Wolfe referred to “the escapes of Time and Memory” he meant just that; part of their function had been as devices enabling him to avoid the present. Now he could dispense with them at will.

It is this realization that enabled him, in the novel he was writing when he died, *The Hills Beyond*, to return for subject matter to the country and people he knew best. As long as he depended upon his personal memories, he was denied the further use of the Carolina mountains and mountaineers for his art, except on those rare occasions, such as the story “The Lost Boy,” when he could find a portion of his childhood memory that had been relatively unexploited in *Look Homeward, Angel* or *The Web and the Rock*. But now that he was no longer dominated by his past, a prisoner to it, he could use it. He could approach it from without, and take from it material in “space and color and in time” with which to create characters and situations such as those in *The Hills Beyond*. No longer was it necessary to set down events just as they had happened to him; now he could create as well as re-create. He could “go home again” after all—not as a form of escape into memory, but detachedly, as an artist, to select from the things he knew

best the raw material for his art, just as his mentor James Joyce did with Dublin.

Had Wolfe lived, his subsequent books would likely have been quite different from his earlier autobiographical novels; we have *The Hills Beyond* for proof. They would have included, we may surmise, stories of the Carolina mountain life he knew so well, stories in which he would have taken long strides toward telling that chronicle of American history he dreamed of writing some day.

We have been talking about Eugene Gant and George Webber no less than Thomas Wolfe. For these are autobiographical novels. The hero of these novels is Thomas Wolfe, and Thomas Wolfe is, at the last, *a fictional character*. For we should have little interest in Thomas Wolfe if he had not written the novels about himself. It is because we are interested in the protagonist in the novels, who calls himself Eugene or George but whom we know is named Thomas Wolfe, that we read the letters he wrote to his mother, the reminiscences of his friends and foes, the critical analyses of his work. When we visit the "Old Kentucky Home" in Asheville, it is because it is Dixieland. When we read about Julia Elizabeth Wolfe, it is because she is Eliza Gant. The irony of all this—fiction becoming fact, fact becoming an adjunct of fiction—was noted by Wolfe himself. In "The Return of the Prodigal" he had Eliza Gant tell Eugene about people who addressed her as the "Miss Delia" of the novels.

Our interest in the events of Thomas Wolfe's life is, I think, unlike our interest in most other writers. It is a different kind of interest. We read the Wolfe novels as fiction, but the man who wrote them plays the leading role in them—is a part, the chief part, of the fiction. When we read the novels, we do so because we can watch the protagonist move from birth to maturity. The protagonist is Thomas Wolfe. As far as the reader of the novels is concerned, Thomas Wolfe is a character in a novel, created by his author just as surely as Thomas Sutpen is the creation of another novelist, William Faulkner.

In the last analysis it is not where the author gets his material, or what method he uses to transform it into art, that matters. It is the created work of art, the printed novel or poem or painting, that interests us. Thomas Wolfe the author created Thomas Wolfe the protagonist. Why he did so, whether he ought to have done so, does not ultimately make any difference to us. We read the Wolfe novels as art. No more than with Yeats' poems does the artist's personal history influence our ultimate aesthetic judgment. We have the work of fiction to go on, and though in our enthusiasm and curiosity we may look around it and behind it for information about it, it is to the work of fiction that we must keep coming back. Sometimes the author tells his story poorly, and when he does, the fiction fails because the novelist did. Sometimes the author tells it well, and when he does, the fiction succeeds because the author understood the meaning of the chief character.

It may well be that Wolfe's eventual place in American literature will be as a one-volume novelist. But what a tremendous one volume *Look Homeward, Angel* is! Its characters are rounded and complete. It tells a story fully and well. It is the story of a boy growing up in a North Carolina town from 1900 until 1920, and it truthfully captures a twenty-year segment of the past for us. It is alive in space and color and time, because when the author wrote it he was temporarily home again, and the weather of his youth around him.

Footnotes

I—THE FORM OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

¹ The term "formalist" is a misleading, and disputed, one. I use it journalistically, and for want of a better term, to indicate the group of modern critics, most of them poets as well, who write for the better quarterly reviews of literature, and who have, I think, produced most of the first-rate literary criticism in our country for over three decades. I call them "formalists" to differentiate as much as possible from the sociological, the historical, the Freudian, and the Impressionistic schools, and because their approach has been primarily in terms of the formal commitments of the work of literature itself.

For a discussion of Wolfe's critical reputation see Betty Thompson, "Thomas Wolfe: Two Decades of Criticism," in *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*, ed. Richard Walser (Boston, 1953).

² Caroline Gordon, "Some Readings and Misreadings," *Sewanee Review* (Summer, 1953), 405.

³ R. V. Cassill, "Editorial: The Wolfe Revival," *Western Review* (Summer, 1952), 337.

⁴ "Some Readings and Misreadings," *Sewanee Review*, 405.

⁵ Mr. Richard Hart, of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, Md., was kind enough to furnish this information.

⁶ "The Sorrows of Thomas Wolfe," *Collected Essays of John Peale Bishop*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York, 1948), 136. Hereafter cited as *Collected Essays*. See also his perceptive remarks in another essay in the same volume, "The Myth and Modern Literature."

⁷ Letter, quoted in Richard Walser, Preface to *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*, ed. Walser, xii.

Asked in a classroom interview, "how do you rank yourself with contemporary writers?", Faulkner was quoted as replying: "1. Thomas Wolfe: he had much courage and wrote as if he didn't have long to live; 2. William Faulkner; 3. Dos Passos; 4. Ernest Hemingway: he has no courage, has never crawled out on a limb. He has never been known to use a word that might cause the reader to check in a dictionary to see if it is properly used; 5. John Steinbeck: at one time I had great hopes for him—now I don't know." (Lavon Rascoe, "Interview with William Faulkner," *Western Review*, Summer, 1951.)

⁸ Thomas Wolfe, *The Story of a Novel* (New York, 1936) 92-93.

⁹ Letter to Edward C. Aswell, quoted in Aswell, "A Note on 'A Western Journey,'" in Thomas Wolfe, *A Western Journal* (Pittsburgh, 1951), v.

¹⁰ *The Story of a Novel*, 93.

¹¹ It may be noted that "form" used in this sense acquires a kind of

terminal value of its own—that is, its presence *per se* in a work of art is considered “good.” And it also implies that the author must be conscious of its presence at all times.

¹² *Collected Essays*, 129.

¹³ The inspiration for the chapter is very likely drawn in part from Father Conmee’s walk through Dublin in the “Wandering Rocks” chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in which the Very Reverend Don John Conmee, S. J., saunters through the streets of Dublin and sees the city about him. Especially at the time of *Look Homeward, Angel*’s composition Wolfe was strongly under Joyce’s influence. Cf. *The Story of a Novel*, 566; also “James Joyce and Thomas Wolfe,” by Nathan Rothman, *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*.

¹⁴ *Thomas Wolfe’s Letters to His Mother*, ed. John Skally Terry (New York, 1943), 39. Hereafter cited as *Letters to His Mother*.

¹⁵ Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* (New York, 1939), 232.

¹⁶ Thomas Wolfe, *You Can’t Go Home Again* (New York, 1940), 399.

¹⁷ Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time and the River* (New York, 1935), 498-99.

¹⁸ Maxwell E. Perkins, letter to James Jones, May 9, 1947, in *Editor to Author: The Letters of Maxwell E. Perkins*, ed. John Hall Wheelock (New York, 1950), 296. Hereafter this work will be cited as *Editor to Author*.

¹⁹ Herbert J. Muller, *Thomas Wolfe* (New York, 1947), 29.

²⁰ Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* (New York, 1929), 513-14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 528.

²² *Letters to His Mother*, 4.

²³ Hayden Norwood, *The Marble Man’s Wife* (New York, 1947), 33-34. Hereafter referred to as Norwood.

²⁴ I am told by Mr. Don Shoemaker, editor of *The Asheville Citizen*, that during the 1940’s *Look Homeward, Angel* was actually introduced as historical record in a court case involving one of Mrs. Wolfe’s real-estate transactions!

²⁵ For purposes of autobiographical comparison, cf. Norwood, 1, 4 ff., 160. This reference and those which follow are provided in order to show how the autobiographical character of the various events in the Wolfe novels can be substantiated all along the way. I must reiterate, however, that the events are *incorporated* in the novels, and our concern with them is at bottom a matter of *textual explication*, not biography.

²⁶ Cf. Norwood, 186-87.

²⁷ Cf. *Letters to His Mother*, 136, 144; Norwood, 56-58.

²⁸ Cf. Norwood, 170, 176; Thomas Wolfe, “Writing Is My Life,” letters to Mrs. J. M. Roberts, *The Atlantic* (December, 1946; January, February, 1947).

²⁹ Cf. Agatha Boyd Adams, *Thomas Wolfe: Carolina Student* (Chapel Hill, 1950); Don Bishop, “Tom Wolfe as a Student,” *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*.

³⁰ Cf. *Letters to His Mother*, 51.

³¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 144.

³² Cf. *Ibid.*, xxviii.

³³ Cf. Richard S. Kennedy, “Wolfe’s Harvard Years,” *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*; Thomas Clark Pollock and Oscar Cargill, *Thomas Wolfe*

at Washington Square (New York, 1954), 3-18; also letters of period 1920-23 in *Letters to His Mother*.

³⁴ Cf. Norwood, 125-27.

³⁵ Cf. Kennedy, "Wolfe's Harvard Years," *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*, 21, 23.

³⁶ Cf. *Letters to His Mother*, 54-57, 60-62.

³⁷ Cf. the account in Pollock and Cargill, *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, written by Cargill, which amusingly attempts to "prove" the "truth" about Wolfe at New York University, primarily to rectify the "errors" in *Of Time and the River*!

³⁸ Cf. *Letters to His Mother*, 103-104.

³⁹ Cf. *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, 36-37.

⁴⁰ *The Story of a Novel*, 6-8.

⁴¹ Cf. *Letters to His Mother*, 112.

⁴² Cf. *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, 41-55; also Aline Bernstein, *The Journey Down* (New York, 1938), which is "Esther Jack's" story of the romance.

⁴³ Cf. *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, 53-54; Henry T. Volkening, "Penance No More," *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*, 38-39; *Editor to Author*, 247.

⁴⁴ Cf. *The Story of a Novel*, 10.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Letters to His Mother*, 173.

⁴⁶ Cf. Jonathan Daniels, chapter entitled "Poet of the Boom," in *Tar Heels* (New York, 1947). Reprinted in *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*.

⁴⁷ Cf. *The Story of a Novel*, 17-25; George McCoy, "Asheville and Thomas Wolfe," *North Carolina Historical Review* (April, 1953).

⁴⁸ Cf. *The Story of a Novel*, 59-73.

⁴⁹ Cf. Vardis Fisher, "My Experiences with Thomas Wolfe," in *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, 134; also Muller, *Thomas Wolfe*, 141.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Editor to Author*, 119-26.

⁵¹ John Peale Bishop, "The Myth and Modern Literature," *Collected Essays*, 128.

II—THE TIME OF THOMAS WOLFE

¹ *The Story of a Novel*, 62-64.

² *Look Homeward, Angel*, 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴ *Of Time and the River*, 245.

⁵ *The Web and the Rock*, 674.

⁶ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 387.

⁷ Thomas Wolfe, *From Death to Morning* (New York, 1935), 204.

⁸ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 191.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 268-69. There recently appeared in one of the Asheville newspapers a letter in which the writer reminisced about old times in Asheville and spoke of how kind so many of the old residents had been to him, mentioning some by name. It was not until after the edition

had been placed on sale that someone realized that some persons named in the letter had been employees of Queen Elizabeth's establishment.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 623.

¹¹ *The Story of a Novel*, 51-52.

¹² Edwin Muir, *The Structure of the Novel* (London, 1928), 98-100.

¹³ *The Web and the Rock*, 540.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 542-44.

¹⁵ *Of Time and the River*, 231.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

¹⁸ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 193.

¹⁹ *The Web and the Rock*, 275.

²⁰ *Of Time and the River*, 422-23.

²¹ *The Web and the Rock*, 323-25.

²² *Ibid.*, 11.

²³ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 192.

²⁴ *Of Time and the River*, 470.

²⁵ Margaret Church, "Thomas Wolfe: Dark Time," *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*.

²⁶ *A Western Journal*, v.

²⁷ Edwin Berry Burgum, *The Novel and the World's Dilemma* (New York, 1947), 27.

²⁸ Dorothy Heiderstadt, "Studying Under Thomas Wolfe," *Mark Twain Quarterly* (Winter, 1950), 8.

²⁹ *Of Time and the River*, 30.

³⁰ *The Web and the Rock*, 541.

³¹ *The Story of a Novel*, 31.

³² *Of Time and the River*, 856-59.

³³ *The Story of a Novel*, 8-9.

³⁴ Thomas Wolfe, *The Hills Beyond* (New York, 1941), 121.

³⁵ See *Letters to His Mother*, 52, 314, 316.

³⁶ *The Hills Beyond*, 29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴¹ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 81.

⁴² Marcel Proust, *The Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Frederick A. Blossom (New York, 1932), II, 996.

Whether Wolfe was familiar with Proust's time theories is questionable. At one point in *Of Time and the River* he mentions Proust, but the chances are that if he had really understood what Proust was about, it would have occasioned much excitement on Eugene Gant's part. Nor does Wolfe so much as mention Proust in *The Story of a Novel*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Desmond MacCarthy, *Memories* (New York, 1953), 113.

⁴⁵ This is not altogether fair to Wolfe; the last two novels were published posthumously, and Wolfe had intended to revise them considerably. It may be that at some future date it will be necessary to re-edit the last two novels into one coherent narrative. The more one reads them,

the greater the conviction becomes that they do not represent what Thomas Wolfe wished them to be. What now constitute two "novels" should perhaps be a single, much more tightly pruned volume.

III—INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY

¹ *The Web and the Rock*, 689.

² *The Hills Beyond*, 38.

³ *The Web and the Rock*, 648-49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 692.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 690.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 691.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 692.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 562.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁰ *Of Time and the River*, 92.

¹¹ *The Web and the Rock*, 693-95.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 309.

¹⁴ Richard S. Kennedy, "Wolfe's Harvard Years," *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*.

¹⁵ *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, 16.

¹⁶ Monroe M. Stearns, "The Metaphysics of Thomas Wolfe," *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*.

¹⁷ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 38.

¹⁸ *The Web and the Rock*, 83.

¹⁹ H. W. Garrod, however, points out that Wordsworth's notions of pre-existence involved the perception of the truth of things "in flashes, in gleams of sense-perception," as befits the "pure sensationalist" he was; whereas for Plato, the "pure intellectualist," the senses were the sources of all error and the world of abstract ideas alone possessed truth.—*Wordsworth: Lectures and Essays* (Oxford, 1923), 117-18.

There is in addition a considerable difference between Wordsworth's ideas on the subject and those of his friend Coleridge. Arthur Beatty remarks that Wordsworth treated "'man as man—a subject of eye, ear, touch and taste, in contact with external nature,' and contrary to Coleridge's opinion, not 'informing the senses from the mind' but 'compounding a mind out of the senses.'"—*William Wordsworth*, University of Wisconsin Studies, XXIV (Madison, 1927), 106. And Raymond D. Havens insists that "the formulation and development of the idea [of pre-existence] may be influenced by Coleridge but the original feeling and the conception as well as the later vitality came from Wordsworth's own experience."—*The Mind Of a Poet* (Baltimore, 1941), I, 78.

One is inclined to demand a similar priority for Thomas Wolfe. Undoubtedly he first encountered the formulation of these notions of pre-existence and childhood powers in Wordsworth and Coleridge, and yet one can find in his autobiographical accounts of childhood abundant reasons why he would be susceptible to them. No doubt the role of John Livingston Lowes at Harvard was considerable; but the chances are that Lowes' explication of Coleridgean and Wordsworthian Platonism served

mainly to confirm and articulate notions already present in Wolfe's mind.

²⁰ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 557.

²¹ *Of Time and the River*, 268.

²² *You Can't Go Home Again*, 743.

²³ C. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (Cambridge, 1949), 100.

²⁴ R. D. Havens, *The Mind of a Poet* (Baltimore, 1941), II, 399-400.

²⁵ *Of Time and the River*, 78-79. Italics mine.

²⁶ C. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*, 96-97.

²⁷ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 556.

²⁸ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 743.

²⁹ *Of Time and the River*, 52.

³⁰ See Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. Knight (London, 1896), 189n-90n.

³¹ Just how content Wordsworth really was with the exchange is another matter. Garrod points out that though Wordsworth says he has replaced the vision with other gifts, "does he? In all that matters to us, that is to say in his poetry, does he?" The Ode closes Wordsworth's great period, Garrod asserts. After that came "the extraordinary decline in poetic power which begins with the ending of the Ode. Wordsworth did cease to see things." Wordsworth: *Lectures and Essays* (Oxford, 1923), 29.

³² *The Web and the Rock*, 605.

³³ *Ibid.*, 606.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵ *Remembrance of Things Past*, II, 998.

IV—THE TOWN

¹ W. M. Frohock, "Thomas Wolfe: Of Time and Neurosis," *Southwest Review* (Autumn, 1948), 349.

² Agatha Boyd Adams, *Thomas Wolfe: Carolina Student*, 13.

³ *The Web and the Rock*, 3-4.

⁴ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 111-12.

⁵ *North Carolina and Its Resources*, published by the State Board of Agriculture (Raleigh, 1896), 312.

⁶ Samuel H. Hobbs, Jr., *North Carolina Economic and Social* (Chapel Hill, 1930), 348.

⁷ Jonathan Daniels, *Tar Heels*, 221.

⁸ Norman Foerster, "Iowa, North Carolina, and the Humanities," *North Carolina Historical Review* (April, 1946), 227.

⁹ *Letters to His Mother*, 49-50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹ For a discussion of Wolfe and the Nashville group, see Floyd C. Watkins, "Thomas Wolfe and the Nashville Agrarians," *Georgia Review* (Winter, 1953), 410-23. See also John Donald Wade, "Prodigal," *The Southern Review* (Summer, 1935); and Robert Penn Warren, "The Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe," *American Review* (May, 1935), two reviews of *Of Time and the River* by members of the Nashville group. The Warren review essay is reprinted in *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*.

¹² Allen Tate, "The Profession of Letters in the South," *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York, 1948), 275.

¹³ *Letters to His Mother*, 240n.

¹⁴ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 26-32.

¹⁵ *Of Time and the River*, 545.

¹⁶ *Letters to His Mother*, 19.

¹⁷ In 1924 Wolfe visited the estate of a friend, Olin Dows, at Rhinebeck, New York, on the Hudson River. The visit is recounted in *Of Time and the River*, 510-98, with Dows becoming Joel Pierce. The play Eugene reads to Joel Pierce in the novel is obviously the version of *Mannerhouse* published in 1948. Oscar Cargill points out, however, that the ms. copy of the play that Wolfe lost in the winter of 1924-25, in Paris, contained only two acts and a prolog, and so perhaps the new ending was added when Wolfe rewrote the play that winter in Paris. Cargill and Pollock, *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, 35-36, and notes 112-13, 75.

¹⁸ Thomas Wolfe, *Mannerhouse* (New York, 1948), 150.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152-53.

²⁰ *Letters to His Mother*, 77.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

²² *Look Homeward, Angel*, 531.

²³ *Tar Heels*, 220-21.

²⁴ George W. McCoy, "Asheville and Thomas Wolfe," *North Carolina Historical Review* (April, 1953), 203-204.

²⁵ *The Story of a Novel*, 18-19.

²⁶ George W. McCoy, "Asheville and Thomas Wolfe," *North Carolina Historical Review*, 210.

²⁷ *Tar Heels*, 226-27.

²⁸ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 125.

²⁹ *Of Time and the River*, 38-39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

³¹ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 80.

³² *Ibid.*, 142-43.

³³ Wolfe's brother-in-law, Ralph W. Wheaton, was for some time an employee of the National Cash Register Company. Terry declares that he was the model for Randy Shepperton. *Letters to His Mother*, 3n.

³⁴ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 396.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 393.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 143-44.

³⁷ "Writing Is My Life," *The Atlantic* (January, 1947).

³⁸ *Ibid.* (February, 1947).

V—THE CITY

¹ *Of Time and the River*, 24.

² "No Door," *From Death to Morning*, 2.

³ *The Web and the Rock*, 91-92.

⁴ Theodore Dreiser, *The 'Genius'* (New York, 1946), 34.

⁵ Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York, 1943), I, 36.

⁶ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York, 1950), 61.

⁷ *The Web and the Rock*, 222.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 246.

- ⁹ Allen Tate, "The Profession of Letters in the South," *On the Limits of Poetry*, 278.
- ¹⁰ William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York, 1948), 194-95.
- ¹¹ *The Web and the Rock*, 183.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 275.
- ¹³ *Of Time and the River*, 423.
- ¹⁴ *The Web and the Rock*, 329.
- ¹⁵ *The Red and the Black*, II, 52-53.
- ¹⁶ *The Web and the Rock*, 390.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 382.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.
- ¹⁹ Donald Davidson, "Why the Modern South Has a Great Literature," *Vanderbilt Studies in the Humanities* (Nashville, 1951), I, 15.
- ²⁰ *The Web and the Rock*, 539.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 581.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 544.
- ²³ *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, 25.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 88-89.
- ²⁵ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 481-82.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 396.
- ²⁷ *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, 50; and note 173, 80; see also *Editor to Author*, 122-23.
- ²⁸ Herbert J. Muller, *Thomas Wolfe*, 8.
- ²⁹ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 724-25.
- ³⁰ George McCoy, "Asheville and Thomas Wolfe," *North Carolina Historical Review* (April, 1953).
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Letter to Richard Walser, quoted in Preface to *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*, vii.
- ³³ *The Web and the Rock*, 586.
- ³⁴ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 720.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 740-41.
- ³⁶ *The Web and the Rock*, 257.
- ³⁷ *The Hills Beyond*, 129.
- ³⁸ John M. MacLachlan, "Folk Concepts in the Novels of Thomas Wolfe," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* (December, 1946), 180.
- ³⁹ Floyd C. Watkins, "Thomas Wolfe and the Nashville Agrarians," 423.
- ⁴⁰ Robert B. Heilman, "The Southern Temper," *Southern Renaissance*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore, 1953), 7.
- ⁴¹ Sinclair Lewis, *John Dos Passos 'Manhattan Transfer'* (New York, 1926), 5.
- ⁴² For a discussion of the city in modern American fiction, see Blanche Housman Gelfant, *The City in American Fiction* (Norman, Okla., 1954). See esp. 97-99, 119-32.

VI—THE MOTHER AND THE FATHER

¹ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 192-93.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

³ *Letters to His Mother*, 191.

⁴ Julia Wolfe's copy of *From Death to Morning* bore on the flyleaf an inscription saying that the story "The Web of Earth" was her story. Norwood, 68.

⁵ *Letters to His Mother*, 220-21.

⁶ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 574.

⁷ *The Web and the Rock*, 82-83.

⁸ *Of Time and the River*, 352.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ *From Death to Morning*, 302-303.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹² *Ibid.*, 248.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁴ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 191.

¹⁵ Herbert J. Muller, *Thomas Wolfe*, 76.

¹⁶ John Peale Bishop, "The Sorrows of Thomas Wolfe," *Collected Essays*, 130.

¹⁷ *Letters to His Mother*, xx-xxi.

¹⁸ Quoted in W. P. Cummin, review of *Mannerhouse*, *North Carolina Historical Review* (July, 1949), 368-69.

¹⁹ *Letters to His Mother*, 46-47.

²⁰ *From Death to Morning*, 201.

²¹ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 574.

²² *From Death to Morning*, 250. W. O. Wolfe died in bed, at home, while Julia Elizabeth Wolfe died at the age of eighty-five in New York City, where she had been visiting friends of her son. Previously she had concluded a trip to California.

²³ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 128.

²⁴ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 127.

²⁵ Agatha Boyd Adams, *Thomas Wolfe: Carolina Student*, 21.

²⁶ *Of Time and the River*, 57.

²⁷ *From Death to Morning*, 229-30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 296.

²⁹ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 63.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

³² *Ibid.*, 212.

³³ *From Death to Morning*, 229.

³⁴ *Of Time and the River*, 254.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁶ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 22.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁹ *Of Time and the River*, 83.

⁴⁰ *The Web and the Rock*, 68.

⁴¹ *Letters to His Mother*, xii.

⁴² *Look Homeward, Angel*, 127.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁴ *The Web and the Rock*, 661.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 27. I am indebted to one of my students, Mr. James R. Curtis, for pointing out to me the unusual, obviously unconscious use of commercial imagery in Wolfe's first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*. In the little prefatory note Wolfe speaks of fiction being "fact arranged and charged with purpose" and says that "a novelist may turn over one-half the people in a town to make a single figure." In the first chapter, for example, we are told that "Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again . . ." Gilbert Gant's name was changed as "a concession to Yankee phonetics," and he "let the profits of a public house he has purchased roll down his improvident gullet." Afterwards Gant "ekes out a living" by matching fighting cocks and often "spends a night in jail only to escape without a penny in his pocket." At death he "leaves five children, a mortgage and a hunger for voyages as a legacy to his heir, Oliver, to whom he has bequeathed it." Oliver considers his Baltimore years as ones of "waste and loss." And so on. Gant finds "neither order nor establishment in the world." On his way to Altamont he is reminded of "the great barns of Pennsylvania, the ripe bending of golden grain, the plenty, the order, the clean thrift of the people . . ." Mr. Curtis points out more than three hundred such images in the first chapter of *Look Homeward, Angel*.

⁴⁸ *From Death to Morning*, 234.

⁴⁹ Monroe M. Stearns, "The Metaphysics of Thomas Wolfe," *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*, 198.

⁵⁰ *Of Time and the River*, 543.

⁵¹ *The Web and the Rock*, 443.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵³ *Of Time and the River*, 424.

⁵⁴ *The Web and the Rock*, 91.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 583-84.

⁵⁶ *Letters to His Mother*, 197.

⁵⁷ "Writing Is My Life," *The Atlantic* (February, 1947).

⁵⁸ *The Web and the Rock*, 602.

VII—THE WAY HOME

¹ Edward C. Aswell, "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," *The Hills Beyond*, 380.

² *You Can't Go Home Again*, 706. Aswell, in his "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," describes how he selected and compiled the italicized transitional passages in the last two novels from the mass of material Wolfe left behind at his death. The particular passage cited here, he has said, was taken by him from a letter Wolfe wrote to him but did not send. It was found among Wolfe's papers after his death. Letter to present writer, March 26, 1954.

³ Edward C. Aswell, who edited the last two completed novels as well as the uncompleted *The Hills Beyond* from the million or so words that Wolfe left in manuscript when he died, agrees with the present writer that the Man and Body dialogue, unlike most of the second half of *The Web and the Rock*, was probably written after Wolfe had composed

most of the material in the last two novels. (Letter to present writer, February 23, 1954.) Mr. Aswell describes the work of assembling the last three books in his "A Note on Thomas Wolfe" published in the volume containing the third novel, *The Hills Beyond*. He declares that Wolfe wrote the various episodes at different times. Some of the material goes back to the original manuscript of *Look Homeward, Angel*, and some was composed during the last few months of Wolfe's life. Though by no means composed in chronological order, it nevertheless followed a definite autobiographical order in theme.

⁴ Oscar Cargill cites this kind of thing as an example of Wolfe's anti-Semitism! He speaks of Wolfe's "desire to provide himself, in whatever fictional guises in his novels, with an indisputable Anglo-Saxon ancestry." *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, 25.

⁵ *The Hills Beyond*, 121.

⁶ George McCoy, "Ashville and Thomas Wolfe," *North Carolina Historical Review*, 214.

⁷ "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," *The Hills Beyond*, 358.

⁸ Aswell places its period of composition as coming even before the publication of *Of Time and the River*. "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," *The Hills Beyond*, 374.

⁹ *The Story of a Novel*, 7-9.

¹⁰ *Of Time and the River*, 856.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 857.

¹² *Ibid.*, 858.

¹³ "A Note on Thomas Wolfe," *The Hills Beyond*, 374.

¹⁴ *The Web and the Rock*, 455.

¹⁵ Appendix to *Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Henry Reed (Philadelphia, 1851), 668.

¹⁶ *Letters to His Mother*, 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

¹⁸ Karl Viëtor, *Goethe, the Poet* (Boston, 1949), 122.

¹⁹ *The Web and the Rock*, 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 541.

²¹ Bernard DeVoto, "Genius Is Not Enough," *The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe*, 142.

²² *Letters to His Mother*, 46.

²³ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 201.

²⁴ *Letters to His Mother*, 2.

²⁵ One has only to compare the events of *Of Time and the River* with the accounts of his adventures that Wolfe wrote to his mother to see how autobiographical the whole Starwick affair is. The inspiration for Starwick was evidently in part the late Kenneth Raesbeck, who was Professor George Pierce Baker's assistant in the '47 Workshop at Harvard during Wolfe's years there. Later Wolfe met Raesbeck and two women friends in Paris and toured France with them, until they quarreled and parted company. Raesbeck was found dead in 1932 in a Connecticut graveyard, and it was thought that he took his own life. See also *You Can't Go Home Again*, 409; Cargill, *Thomas Wolfe at Washington Square*, 36-37.

²⁶ John Peale Bishop, "The South and Tradition," *Collected Essays*, 5.

²⁷ C. Vann Woodward, "The Irony of Southern History," *Southern Renaissance*, 45.

²⁸ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 13-14.

²⁹ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 139.

³⁰ Allen Tate, "The Fugitive: 1922-25," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* (April, 1945).

³¹ *The Web and the Rock*, 245-46.

³² *Look Homeward, Angel*, 191.

³³ *Letters to His Mother*, 50.

³⁴ *Tar Heels*, 221-24.

³⁵ *Of Time and the River*, 898.

³⁶ *The Web and the Rock*, 61.

³⁷ *Look Homeward, Angel*, 160.

³⁸ *Letters to His Mother*, 64.

³⁹ *Tar Heels*, 220-221.

⁴⁰ *Letters to His Mother*, 42.

⁴¹ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 387.

⁴² *The Web and the Rock*, 692.

⁴³ Edward C. Aswell has remarked to the present writer that, in a certain sense, Wolfe actually "psycho-analyzed" himself in the process of writing his novels.

⁴⁴ *You Can't Go Home Again*, 740-41.

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